

Children of the Cloven Hoof

ALBERT DORRINGTON





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CHILDREN OF THE CLOVEN HOOF

BY
ALBERT DORRINGTON

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CHILDREN OF THE CLOVEN HOOF

CHAPTER I

A PAIR of magpies fluttered into the darkness of the bush where the wonga vines festooned the endless line of barbed wire fence. Heat haze, white as moonlight, clung to the quartz-tipped ranges in the East. On the flats below the haze ran to rusty gold where the grass had yielded to the merciless strokes of the sun.

From a hoof-beaten cattle-pad, on the western edge of the pine scrub, rode a trooper wearing the uniform of the Queensland police. About a whip-length in his wake came a narrow-chested blackboy mounted on a sleek Government horse. The roof of a small homestead showed white against the sheer wall of jungle in the far north. Halting a moment, the trooper scanned, through a pair of binoculars, the small stockyard and outbuildings situated at the rear of the homestead.

"You think they're all out?" he called to the blackboy. "Nobody at home, eh?"

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"Mine think 'em all gone," the boy answered quickly. His naked eye travelled across the hot expanse of intervening scrub, while his teeth gleamed a trifle maliciously. "Gone after white feller's cattle longa big track."

A steady canter brought them to the homestead sliprail. Dismounting cautiously, the trooper approached a small side-window and peeped between the curtains. The room was furnished after the manner of most bush homesteads. A parrot's cage hung near the door, and at sight of the trooper's face at the window the bird commenced a highly animated discourse from within.

"Hello, Marto! Gee up, Darkie! Get out of that hole, you son of a jumbuck! Don't put on airs, Miss Bellinger. It makes poor Polly tired."

The parrot hopped from its perch, whistled noisily, its sulphur-hued crest bobbing to the face at the window. The trooper smiled grimly. "If Polly would only tell the truth," he muttered, "it might save the Queensland Government a lot of worry and expense."

Leaving his horse and carbine in charge of the blackboy, he walked round the homestead like one exploring forbidden territory. Near the kitchen door, covered with an old sack, he discovered a bucket half filled with a tea-coloured solution. Above on the window-sill was a large horse sponge that bore signs of having been soaked in the tawny fluid.

Thrusting his riding-cane into the bucket he drew it out and examined the stained point criti-

cally. "Horse dye," he said grimly. "And no trouble taken to hide it either."

For months past trooper Hannan had been engaged in shepherding the movements of David Bellinger and his two sons, Martin and Clarence. And the business had been full of strange surprises for himself and the Government blackboy who usually accompanied him.

The Bellingers had lived in Queensland all their lives. Inured to its tropic heat and rains, versed in bushcraft to an extent that baffled even the native trackers, they had managed to evade the innumerable toils set for their undoing.

Yet people declared that David Bellinger was more sinned against than sinning. Years before the Maranoa district had become settled or the squatters' drays and teams had found their way into the unexplored wilds, David's selection was regarded as the loneliest outpost in southern Queensland. Wild cattle roamed the gullies and ranges; stragglers from the southern stations beyond the Darling and the Condamine. These unbranded beasts David naturally regarded as his own whenever he felt inclined to round them up and overland them to one of the big sale yards down south.

But since the coming of the squatters and independent pastoralists the country lying north and south of his holding had been annexed and portioned out, and his frequent raids on the wild mobs of mountain cattle were now regarded as illegal. The gold-fever in North Queensland had raised the price of beef, and every stray steer that nipped the open

salt bush was worth fifteen guineas to the marketers. The charge against David and his sons was that they took all unbranded stock whenever they found them.

Trooper Hannan returned to the blackboy at the sliprail, and found him stooping with his head close to the fence in a listening attitude. An unmistakable thudding of hoofs jarred the sound-conducting fence wires. At a sign from the trooper the boy vanished into the scrub. Three minutes later a young woman appeared, seated on a bright bay pony. Cantering up to the homestead verandah, she dismounted briskly, and stood for a moment in the sun-glare to shake the dust from the veil she wore.

Trooper Hannan came forward like one in doubt. "Good day, Hetty," he began, in a reassuring voice. "I'm sorry to have to put in an appearance to-day."

The girl's eyes fell upon the uniformed figure, and her breath quickened. "My name is Miss Bellinger," she answered firmly. "I don't know where you found the other, Constable Hannan."

The trooper flinched, toyed with his cane, as he considered her afresh. She stood ten paces from him, the golden tan of her throat and cheeks appeared to interest him vastly. Once, twice, he smote the point of his boot with his cane, while his eyes grew a trifle harder.

"I beg your pardon," he said, at last. "I didn't think you were so particular."

"I'm full of particularities," she retorted blandly.

"And the name of Bellinger isn't going cheap in these parts. I had a birthday yesterday, Mr. Hannan; it's steadied me. No more Hetty, if you please."

Silence fell between them while the trooper fidgeted uneasily under her quizzing scrutiny.

"Perhaps you'd better be moving, Mr. Hannan," she suggested, icily. "I can hear dad and the boys coming. It's a terrible thing for men to come home and find a policeman at the gate."

"I'll go if you wish, Miss Bellinger." His manner was humble and not without a tinge of regret. Personally he bore her family no ill-will. But there were occasions when his superiors moved him to action. He strolled towards the gate, as though turning a thought in his mind.

"Eustace Fitzallan is coming home," he said at last. "Everybody's talking about it in Engandine. I thought you'd like to hear the news."

The blood in her cheeks deepened beneath the sun-tan. She regarded him narrowly. "The boy's been to school in England, hasn't he?" she asked, simply.

"Oxford," nodded the trooper, "where they knock the young Colonial gentlemen into shape."

"And teach 'em to spell," she ventured, with a quaint drawl in her voice. "Eustace had a private tutor at Wahgunyah. The pair used to spend their time reading novels on our back verandah."

"Eustace and his tutor?"

"Yes. Dad was sorry for that tutor. Eustace

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was fond of my brother Clarry. They had boxing-gloves and singlesticks in the barn. The poor teacher was scared to death for fear old Simon Fitzallan would find out that he was a visitor to our place. Funny though," she added reminiscently, "what boys will risk when they get fond of each other."

"Ye-e-s." The trooper regarded her from the sliprail while the sunlight seemed to wrap her lithe limbs in a golden silhouette. Her birthday had evidently brought wit and womanhood in its wake. As a child and girl he had known her, a slim, wild creature, that seemed to draw her strange beauty from the wind and sun. Yet . . . he could not judge how far she was drawing him from his official reserve. He knew, however, that Eustace Fitzallan, the son of the rich cattle-breeder, had been seen in the vicinity of the Bellinger homestead before he had gone to England to complete his education. The young man would be home again shortly ; and it was inconceivable to him now that the son of the wealthy cattleman and land-owner should resume his friendship with the Bellingers. They were practically a family of outlaws, holding their liberty from day to day by grace of good luck and a little horsemanship.

An unmistakable thudding of hoofs came from a near cattle track. A small party of riders wheeled cleverly from a labyrinth of palm scrub on the right, and cantered almost abreast to the door of the homestead.

Trooper Hannan fidgeted near his saddle girths

like one caught trespassing, and then, as though overcome by a sudden impulse, walked deliberately towards the three horsemen standing at the door.

The Bellingers, father and sons, observed his approach with a certain amused indifference. Slipping saddles and bridles from their sweating animals, they permitted them to wander in the direction of the creek.

Halting a few paces from the homestead verandah, trooper Hannan nodded briefly to David, the father of the two young men. "I must plead guilty to trespass, Mr. Bellinger," he said, pleasantly. "Duty before manners, you know. We're all under the whip in the service."

David Bellinger placed the saddle on the verandah, and stood breathing gently beside his daughter. He was a splendid specimen of the pioneer type of bushman, his great shoulders towering above his daughter's, his feet planted apart. A sudden serenity had come upon him at sight of the trooper, a serenity that spoke of a keen intelligence linked to a dangerous but unruffled fighting temperament which had helped him to slip the innumerable toils set for his capture.

"A policeman's as welcome here as a priest or parson, Mr. Hannan. Better come in out of the sun, and have a cup of tea."

The trooper flushed darkly at the unexpected invitation, but even his blade-edged susceptibilities were not proof against David's quiet dignity of manner, the unassailable good humour inherent in the man. He softened as David continued:

"The sun's been strong to-day, my lad. You've a long ride back to Engandine. What you'll see in my house won't be used as evidence, I'll swear."

The young trooper found himself entering the homestead with Clarry and Martin Bellinger at his heels. The two young men viewed his entry with a certain dog-like reserve, for neither had ever dreamed of seeing a Government officer walking unarmed into their house. Hetty was inclined to laugh at her father's unaccountable ways. Cattle-lifting, in her estimation, was harder work than rearing them naturally. The work of rounding up small herds of gully-sulkers and brumbies had its fascinations. Like her father, she believed that the herds found in the hills rightly belonged to the rounders-up. Occasionally, maybe, a branded bull or heifer found its way into the mob, and for that reason her father had been subject to periodical visits from the police.

Trooper Hannan ventured within the Bellinger homestead, not without some knowledge of the man who proffered him hospitality. The utter hopelessness of catching David and his sons at work had impressed itself upon him many months before. His present visit was merely in obedience to an order from headquarters.

Hetty placed a white cloth on the dining-room table, and while her father smoked and talked to their visitor she busied herself in preparing some scones and tea. Clarry and Martin helped themselves ravenously to the big dish of brown scones the moment they appeared on the table. The

elder youth, Martin, claimed the trooper's attention. He was attracted by the sullen cast of features, the deep-set eyes and jaw, that denoted abnormal fighting instincts. Martin Bellinger was not a handsome youth. Life in the Queensland bush had somehow warped his body and mind. Clarry was three years younger than Martin, and in point of good looks resembled his father.

The trooper ate slowly, and listened attentively when David spoke of the weather and the crops. Hetty flitted in and out, holding up Martin's appetite to ridicule and contempt as dish after dish of scones was demanded and decimated. A thought came to the trooper that some day he would meet these three, under arms, in some lonely gully or creek bend. Martin's jaw and eyes fascinated him strangely, the great muscle-packed shoulders, the long arms, and solid torso. A man to respect, he thought, in a tight place.

Hetty busied herself in the kitchen, while the parrot shouted instructions to Darkie to "gee up." The bird also thought fit to remind Hetty that her airs were an infliction upon the household. Everybody laughed except Martin. Even when the parrot executed a series of clever dog whistles he scowled menacingly in the direction of the cage.

The sudden clink of a bridle-chain outside startled the little company. Trooper Hannan alone preserved his composure. "My black tracker," he explained curtly. "Getting tired of waiting, I suppose."

"Your black tracker," snapped Martin, turning

to the window. "Got no right inside our rails, Mr. Hannan. Can't you travel without these bloodhounds?" he asked viciously.

"That's not the way to put a question to a visitor," came from David sternly. "Eat another scone, my lad, and don't let your temper spoil your appetite."

"I'm talking of the black tracker," insisted Martin, half rising from the table, and pointing across the paddock, where the narrow-hipped black fellow was visible, standing near the two horses.

The trooper drank his tea quickly, and his eyes sought David's. "I don't like black fellows, either." His tone was apologetic. "But the regulations insist on their accompanying us."

David grunted a word of sympathy, then taking up his pipe, filled it lazily, and passed his big gutta-percha pouch to the trooper. Martin cooled slowly after his outburst. Not for a moment, however, did his eyes move from the lean shadow by the sliprail. Clarry amused himself impaling flies against the Hessian walls with the aid of a harness needle.

Although the trooper listened to David's talk with a show of respect, his glance wandered from time to time across the kitchen, where Hetty busied herself, preparing the evening meal. The fame of her good looks had travelled beyond the Maranoa country. The lonely stockriders talked of David Bellinger's girl; they praised her as a dare-devil rider, who had saved her brothers from a score of police-traps set for them by the cunning officers

of the law. Hannan's brooding glances seemed to annoy her a little, especially after Martin's outburst against the black tracker's proximity to the house. Personally the young trooper favoured the Bellingers' cause. He was aware that the rich squatters of Central Queensland had banded together in the hope of driving David from the country. Branded cattle had been driven purposely within his fences, with a view to bringing about a prosecution. But upon each occasion the trap had failed.

David appeared to divine the young trooper's thoughts. He sighed responsively with the tact of a seer. "Some of the rich men in this district have tried hard to get me and my lads behind the bars, Mr. Hannan. There's Eustace's father, Simon : he's been stealin' land for the last thirty years off an' on. He began by takin' a thousand acres of scrub country ; then he stole three miles of river frontage ; now he's got eight men at work fencing in the ranges. Got no more title to the land than a crow."

"That's pioneering," laughed Clarry, holding up a fly on the point of the harness needle.

"Pioneering, when gentlemen of means try it on," admitted David, good-humouredly ; "rascally thievin' when a fellow like me works the dodge."

The trooper bit his nails, glanced disconsolately over his shoulder because the shadow of the girl had gone from the sunpatch in the doorway.

"An' the way these gentlemen pioneers try to get rid of their neighbours !" went on David.

"About a month before young Fitzallan went to England somebody drove a mob of prize milkers into our paddocks. The blamed things had hardly started to feed before a couple of policemen rode up and wanted to charge me with havin' 'em on my premises."

"What did you say?"

"Oh, gave 'em an alibi for a start," laughed David. "It happened that Eustace was in our barn havin' a game with Clarry. Well, he came out an' flared up. Said the troopers ought to be shot for working up such a case. I don't know what his father thought when he heard of it. They packed him off to England pretty soon after. He saved us, anyhow."

Hetty entered the room and cast a disparaging glance at her elder brother. "Scones and black trackers don't agree with you, Marto," she said, banteringly. "You want a spell."

"He looks a bit jaded." The trooper regarded Martin sympathetically. "I feel off colour myself. It's a month since I tasted vegetables or soft food. Beef, damper, and tobacco, day in and out; not a good diet for men who carry arms."

Beyond the farthest belt of scrub the sun flared in a nimbus of molten red. A belled steer wandered across the house paddock into the eerie dusk of the bush, followed by several short-horned beasts that moaned dismally as they filed past.

"Good country for cattle," Hannan said, lazily. "A man might do well out here with a little capital to back him. I saw some open grass country over

at Jackman's Flat last week; it looked good enough to fatten half the stock this side of the Maranoa."

The black tracker held his horse while he gained the saddle. Turning, he waved to Clarry and David. Hetty watched him from the kitchen door as he passed. "Good-bye!" He spoke almost softly, but his words carried far. "It will be a long time before I'm up here again, Miss Bellinger."

She made no answer as he cantered down the bush track toward the township of Engandine in the south. In his shadow rode the narrow-hipped black tracker, his sharp eyes noting every inch of the ground over which they passed. He turned in the saddle once, and his black finger indicated the far ranges.

Hannan followed his gesture, shook his head as though denying some point or suggestion of the tracker's, and rode on.

"Not a bad fellow," commented David, as the young trooper passed out of sight. "He was pretty close to us, three weeks ago, when we were punching that small lot of fats to the Flinders. He held away for some reason or other."

"Don't put your trust in a policeman, dad," laughed Clarry. "If they let you off to-day, it's because they're laying a bigger trap for you to-morrow."

"Not always, lad, not always. Hannan let us off out of sheer good-nature."

"Oh, dad, do ease off." Hetty turned aside

impatiently. "They'd make Hannan a sergeant if he could catch you driving cattle. He'd get a pension, and his name would be in the papers. Have a nice cool bath, dad," she added cheerily. "It will steady you. There's plenty of water in the tank."

Martin came to the verandah and looked swiftly in the direction of the departing officer. "Did you see where the black fellow was pointing?" he asked huskily. "Right across the track where I took Lochiel a couple of days ago."

"He was only guessing," laughed David. Then he turned and faced his son a trifle anxiously, noting with some concern the nervous lines about his mouth and brow. "There was no need for your little outbreak at table, my lad," he said chidingly. "You're strung up a bit too tight."

"Strung up!" Martin kindled, his eyes dilating with suppressed passion. "What kind of a shyster is he to go sneaking about a cottage when people are away!"

He indicated the bucket of horse dye under the kitchen window. "Did you see the point of his cane where he'd been sticking it in? Look at the drops on the ground where he tried to shake it off! The swine!"

"It's a policeman's business to find out things," answered David, unmoved. "It's a pity you didn't leave Lochiel alone. The horse is no good to us. You might as well have lifted a blessed piano."

"I took it because Simon Fitzallan bought it for Mr. Namby Pamby Eustace," Martin snarled.

"I'll shoot the horse before that fellow can ride it!"

David laughed again, but Hetty flushed under her sun-tan. Clarry drew her into the kitchen, unobserved. "He doesn't mean what he says, Het. Let him fire off a bit; he's been in the sun all day."

"Why," she gasped, "I didn't know he stole Lochiel from the Fitzallan stables! Dad didn't tell me."

Clarry closed the kitchen door stealthily, after having satisfied himself that Martin was engaged talking to his father.

"We couldn't stop him at that bit of work, Het," he went on, under his breath. "The horse is a thoroughbred, worth about five hundred guineas. Simon bought it at the beginning of the year for Eustace to ride when he comes home."

"And you—you let him take it?" Hetty was kneeling by the camp oven, her crimsoning face half covered by her uplifted hand. "I thought you had a bit of friendship left for Eustace, Clarry. I didn't think you were quite a blackguard."

Clarry looked depressed. "I can't stop Marto doing things, Het. He wanted Lochiel. Even dad couldn't persuade him out of it."

"Is that why Hannan called?"

"Seems like it. Eustace's old man hates us like poison. He's had the troopers around our place till they're sick of watching us. Marto reckons he's quits with Simon now. The horse is a fair beauty."

Clarry sat astride a chair and described the

stolen thoroughbred as only a genuine lover of horses could. He pictured with a certain gusto the animal's beautiful proportions, its lean Arab head, its wonderful pace and staying qualities. "Why, you can see its veins through the satin skin, Het. Forelegs as small as your wrist, and full of pace, goes like the wind. I rode it for a mile; gosh, it flew, every sinew in it crying for work!"

"Clarry, you are a little cad!" Hetty turned upon him a face that was crimson to the eyes. "You and dad allowed Marto to put that filthy stain on Lochiel's coat. I'm sorry now," she added, sharply, "that Hannan didn't pick up your tracks."

Clarry was dismayed by his sister's manner. His great plea that horses came before all forms of human friendship remained unuttered. To him the stealing of a thoroughbred animal from Simon Fitzallan's stable was a piece of retribution well deserved. "Why, Eustace will understand when he hears of it, Het. Didn't he help us once to round up a big lot of cattle at the back of his father's boundary?"

"He'll be a different Eustace when he comes home," predicted Hetty. "Watch him. He'll put on side and wear blazers. This old hut of ours will never see him again—not after Oxford."

Hetty went about her work a little thoughtfully. The homecoming of Eustace Fitzallan after an absence of three years meant nothing to her. Her father's voice rose and fell outside as he argued with Martin on the risks attached to horse-stealing in comparison with the safer business of wild-

cattle hunting. Hetty paused in her work, at times, to listen to their talk, but returned again swiftly to her mind-pictures of the home-coming of Eustace. A tall, olive-complexioned boy with something of the dreaming Spaniard in him. Manner slightly argumentative and given to outbursts of enthusiasm that carried him to ridiculous lengths. That was the boy she remembered, grown hard and cynical, no doubt, under the influence of university life, a little ashamed now perhaps of his old bush acquaintances.

Martin approached the kitchen window, followed by David, and the two stood examining the bucket of horse-dye with mixed feelings. Martin raised it after a while and scattered it in a shower across the soft earth.

"If they find Lochiel now," laughed David, "I don't see how they can swear to the dye on his back. They can't prove you put it on unless they find some of the colour on the premises, some that will match the stuff on Lochiel's coat."

"Hannan's got some on the end of his cane," growled Martin. "We were fools to let him go so easily. That splash of red at the end of his cane might gaol the lot of us."

"The heat and the night dew will sweat the colour off Lochiel," argued David. "The stuff you've mixed together isn't fast colour. Anyhow, you'd better get rid of the animal as soon as you can."

CHAPTER II

ABOUT four miles south of the Bellingers' selection, tucked away under the lee of the ranges, stood the wide-verandahed homestead of Simon Fitzallan. Wahgunyah station, with its well-grassed downs and magnificent river-frontage, was regarded as the finest grazing land in Queensland. Forests of bunya pine and ironbark sheltered its western boundaries from the scorching winds that swept the arid plains beyond the mountain range.

Thirty years before Simon Fitzallan had crossed the New South Wales border with a couple of pack horses and a dray, and for the first time in his life he gazed upon a perspective of unoccupied land that cried for the feet of cattle and sheep. Rich downs of blue grass stretched to the foot of the hills. Palm and pine scrub pencilled the naked edges of grass plain where the soft black soil clung to the wheel spokes. Simon looked once, and straightway set his seal on all the land where the river flowed widest along the virgin flats of the Maranoa. He paid no fee for his right of ownership, and within a space of three years his herds roamed unhindered over a piece of territory somewhat larger than a German Principality.

Other adventurers came after him : the Colingsbys, the Schofels, and the Hammerslys, land-

hungry pioneers with the itch of possession in their sun-smitten eyes. On their heels poured a little army of free-selectors and cedar-thieves, men who slew and stripped wherever a blood-red cedar showed its beautiful crest above the jungle foliage.

Simon was in his sixtieth year, a lank-jawed little man, with bird-like eyes and nose. Hoofs and horns were his gods, the naked spaces between mountain and river the only heaven he was likely to know. The breeding of cattle interested him vastly. He supplied many of the big southern towns with beef and horses. His station brands were recognised in the Melbourne and Adelaide markets. Simon had studied the seasons with a ferocious zeal that brought him many rewards. His vast herds multiplied with the years, until the Bellingers taught his overflowing stock to walk fifty abreast across the ranges. It was wild work for David and his two sons, but it keened up a languishing police department, and waked men to life who might otherwise have perished from sheer inanition.

Within the interminable spaces of Southern Queensland an army of men and horses might have moved unseen and unheard. The sky gave no sign, the sun and monsoon rains effaced all tracks of man and beast. David fed his children on the proceeds of his calling, humoured the police when they called on evidence bent, evaded them by sheer bush craft when they threatened to overtake him red-handed. Yet even in the wild hurry of the chase he could spare a little sympathy for the

lonely old Simon tramping up and down his homestead verandah at Wahgunyah.

Yet Simon was not so lonely. His son's homecoming bid fair to compensate him for the years of solitude and bitter toil. He was determined that his son should reap where he had sown the golden seeds of success. Two thousand pounds had been spent in beautifying the station homestead during Eustace's absence. Lawns had been made in the front and rear of the house. Gardeners had been sent up from Brisbane to plant English trees and shrubs about the grounds. The house itself had been refurnished, while the homely things which had contented Simon during the years of his fight for existence were cast out in deference to his son's newly acquired tastes.

Often during those three years of waiting the station hands and servants discovered the old stockbreeder walking round and round the new billiard-table practising patiently some long-forgotten stroke, so that Eustace might not be bored for want of a partner in the happy nights to come.

Simon's wife had not proved equal to the physical demands made upon her during the early pioneering days. While the rough, open-air life merely toughened her husband, the stress and discomfort of the first years left their mark on the more sensitive woman. She died before Eustace was in his seventh year, and the boy had grown up in the wilderness, qualifying himself amongst stockriders and dog-trappers, while at other times he writhed under the guidance of an unsympathetic tutor.

Eustace had found relief from his dull surroundings in his clandestine visits to the Bellinger homestead. There he found Clarry and Het together, with certain dingo-headed cattle pups. He joined in their mad romps, and received the full measure of David's hospitality. Simon learned in a round-about way of his son's visits to the house of the cattle-thieves. He was touched to the quick by the news—outraged, scandalised. The tutor was sent about his business ; but only once did Simon exhibit his rage and annoyance to the unsuspecting boy. And Eustace remembered.

Thereafter Simon set himself the task of hounding David from the Maranoa. Eustace was packed off to a college in New England, while Simon heckled the Queensland police department, and wrote wrathful epistles to the morning papers concerning the pests, human and animal, that were sometimes permitted to dwell upon a cattleman's boundary.

Nothing happened to the Bellingers. Many of the visiting police regarded David as a fine type of Colonial manhood—cheery, hospitable, and without malice to his neighbours. They believed that Simon was being preyed upon ; but many of the older officials remembered that Simon had himself preyed upon the land until his everlasting fences had become a menace to the district's progress. Finally, in the matter of ousting the Bellingers, things moved slowly.

Eustace returned during the vacations, to find solace in the Bellingers' dingo pups, in rides with

Clarry and Het, until Simon sought a final remedy in his son's banishment. The young man was dispatched to Oxford, where he remained for three years.

At Magdalen he played for his College eleven against the pick of Balliol College in a game that won for him a little temporary distinction. His last year in College came to an abrupt end. It was hinted in one Australian newspaper that he had come into conflict with the College authorities over his proved tendency to spend his time at a certain tavern instead of in his rooms.

Simon heard this rumour in silence. He loved his son with a fierce devotion that comes to men who have cradled their own motherless bairns in the quiet of the forest. Wifeless for thirteen years, he had watched the boy's career without a qualm concerning his ultimate future. The rough tracks had been made easy, the earth had given its best for his son's enjoying. Better was to come, Simon argued, if Eustace would but give his mind to the business of stock-raising. God gave the open space for men's benefit, he declared, and the devil dragged them into the Gehennas of a town.

No son of his should ever live in a city. The plains and mountains were the natural dwelling-grounds of men. What city hearth, he questioned almost poetically, could rival the flame in the open sky? His own hearth was the forest-edged plain, his music the flood note of river during the wet season, the rain-note on the iron roofs of his station buildings, the swirling music of it as it raced into

the underground tanks and dams. That was the natural tonic for a man's nerves, he told people. All the art a man craved for was in the bush. There was enough colour in a single sunrise to shame the army of oil daubers who lived by means of their hopeless caricatures of nature. What artist, he insisted, could present a stock-yard at mustering time, or even suggest the Titanic horrors of a cattle stampede? No; his son should not be an artist either. He should live what others merely painted or sung—the life of an earth-loved son.

In the thought of Eustace's homecoming he forgot the Bellingers and the loss of his famous blood horse Lochiel. The boy's rooms were put in order; the pick of the station saddle hacks were brought in from the paddocks and stabled near the homestead ready for Eustace's whip and bridle. The boy dearly loved a good horse, but Simon was careful in his choice of country hacks—the temper was ridden out of the ones he chose for his son. There was to be no risk of a broken neck for the young heir of Wahgunyah. The station hands laughed at Simon's motherly care, but the old stockbreeder had witnessed too many horse tragedies in the bush to heed their laughter; he was not inclined to take any chances.

On the day that Trooper Hannan visited the Bellingers, Simon received a visit from the Rev. Gerard Mason, one of the small army of soul-workers who spent their lives among the neglected toilers of outback. Mr. Mason had always been considered a favoured guest of Simon's. The stock-

breeder's long purse was generally at the disposal of the visiting minister, for he believed that his employees worked with greater zeal after a rousing sermon delivered in the big store-room at the rear of the homestead. It steadied the men's nerves, and stopped the gambling in the huts at night. The men enjoyed hearing a well-delivered address that differed from the monosyllabic utterances of the ordinary cattleman.

The minister was under thirty, with a fair skin, and quick, grey eyes, and—it was generally breathed in an undertone—had a sledge-hammer fist when the occasion warranted.

"How are the Bellingers?" was his first salutation as he stepped from the buggy to the verandah. "Have they given you up, or," he paused at the twitching lips of his host, "have they decided to fall back on honest work in future?"

"If the devil had them I'd raise a monument to his memory."

"My dear Mr. Fitzallan, are we sure that we have done our best by these wayward people? Have we shared their fight for existence? David himself has a good heart, a kindly heart, Mr. Fitzallan."

"For my cattle and horses, minister. The man's no better than a common bushranger. He laughs at the police, he invites them to dinner after each fresh raid. I've no chance against the scoundrel," went on Simon bitterly. "I dare not leave a stud horse in the paddocks at night without keeping a gang of spies about my place. Withal, I

am out of pocket to the tune of £800 this year—cattle lifted from under my window.”

“So much!” gasped the minister.

“They go for my blood stock,” continued Simon; “my imported sires and dams. Three Arab mares to their credit in one year. Heaven knows how they dispose of them. The country is watched from Pera Head to the borders, and not a hair of my stolen property has been returned to me.”

“Try friendship, Mr. Fitzallan, a little brotherly intimacy and neighbourliness. Let them know you better—the man you really are, not what you appear to them, a cross-grained, money-making hermit of a fellow.”

Simon flushed at the minister’s words, plucked at his thin sandy beard like one ill-pleased with the other’s point of view.

Mr. Mason warmed to his theme, as if the thought had been uppermost in his mind for months past. “Go to them, and eat their salt, Simon Fitzallan. Get to their human side, and I will attend to their spiritual needs. It is better than persecuting them with mounted police. You are both living on the edge of an unpeopled continent; make friends with the boys, Clarry and Martin, and your cattle will be safe in future.”

Simon laughed outright at what appeared to him the advice of a spiritual fanatic. It was so easy, he thought, to preach brotherly love and forgiveness when the other fellow’s horse had been stolen. Moreover, he was not anxious for advice in his treatment of his riever neighbours. Their downfall

was merely a question of time. Once the hand of the law fastened on them it would hold them for life, David, Clarry, and Martin.

Observing his host's disinclination to pursue the subject further, Mr. Mason seated himself in a verandah chair, waving a pandanus leaf at the flies. A far-off moaning of cattle broke upon the hot noon silence ; several black fellows loafed in the shade of the lime-washed outbuildings while their fluent jabberings betokened a sudden interest in the minister's arrival.

A couple of Chinese cooks attended to the station's culinary arrangements ; Mrs. Prendegast, the housekeeper, and three men-servants looked after the homestead and Simon's few wants. Mr. Mason dined with him in the long cool room overlooking the front lawn. Occasionally the voices of the station hands were heard, accompanied by the swift rush of hoofs and the insistent, yelping dogs, as small mobs of cattle swung through the wings of the yard to the lucerne paddocks along the river flats.

Simon's talk at dinner was of Eustace. The subject of the boy's home-coming became a series of prose illuminations, with never a shadow or rift to relieve the dazzling future. The minister listened, nodded at times as if his interest were a little forced, his mind jaded after the heat and stress of the day.

A second bottle of wine kindled fresh illuminations. Every line and hue of his son's character was held up for the guest's inspection. Eustace had ideals, a passionate love of justice, a leaning

towards the arts and the growing literature of his native Australia. Stockbreeding would occupy much of his son's time in the future, predicted Simon, but there was no limit to the boy's ambitions.

"His quarrel with the college authorities," yawned the minister. "A deplorable event. We must do something for Eustace."

"Do! Why, it's done, sir." Simon regarded his guest a trifle irritably. "Last year I offered to lend the Queensland Government half a million at three per cent. There's nothing for my son to do—it's all done. I could give the district a railway in return for a seat in Parliament for Eustace."

"He would decline it, under the circumstances."

"Of course, he would," agreed the mollified parent. "There are other positions, though, if he's dissatisfied with cattle raising."

The Queensland night came swiftly, bringing cool airs from the coast. Silence clear and unbroken lay over the vast stretches of hill and plain. Sometimes the fluting of a dingo was heard in the ranges, and the foot-weary cattle dogs, lying in the warm dust outside, pricked their ears and whimpered uneasily.

The talk in the men's quarters ran on the home-coming of Eustace, but there were no illuminations, no embellishments of character. The brute language of the overlanders, mingled with certain knife-edge criticisms, predominated. Many of them remembered the olive-skinned boy who could sit a squealing buckjumper with the crack riders of the Paroo and the Gregory. He had his faults, the faults of the rich man's son seen through the magni-

fying lenses of the uneducated democracy. Eustace would return an insufferable bounder, they predicted, brightened by travel, airing his University plumage and manners with the freedom of a lyre-bird. One or two of the older stockmen argued that a University career did not always make an ass of a man. Instances were quoted where prominent young Australians had undergone a course of English schooling and had returned to their native land quite sane and fit for human society.

At ten o'clock all station lights were out except a faint glimmer in the homestead kitchen, where the "slushy" still lingered over his pots and plates. The two Chinese cooks were of regular habits, and usually retired long before the station rouseabouts had finished yarning outside their huts.

Mr. Mason was tossing restlessly under his mosquito-nets in the west room adjoining Simon's. At eleven o'clock the wind veered to the north-west, bringing a storm of dust from the plains, dust that floated, fine as flour, into the uttermost recesses of the house.

Near midnight a cattle-dog began a plaintive yelping, while the tired men searched their bunks for missiles to hurl at the peace-breaker.

From the darkness of the Engandine road came the soft thudding of hoofs. The sleepless Simon, peering from his window, caught the flicker of buggy lamps through the intervening scrub. The lights swerved suddenly at the homestead sliprails, then came the sound of men's voices, at the lower gate, the sudden banging of a rail followed by

peals of insane laughter, that ended in a half-bawled music-hall refrain.

Simon Fitzallan stole to the verandah, and stared under his hand down the dark pathway leading to the house. The buggy lights zigzagged wildly, and came with a galloping swing to the front of the homestead.

Simon was conscious of a pince-nez, perched on an abnormal nose, nodding at him from the buggy interior; and that the owner, a young Hebrew in a check suit, was smiling ingratiatingly. "Evening, sir!" The face blinked owlshly. "We are, I preshume, at the sacred domicile of Somebody Fitzallan, Esquire!"

"I have the honour not to know you, sir," came from the scowling Simon. "You drove in by the wrong gate, I fancy."

At this the pince-nez slipped feebly down the Hebrew's cheek, while the slack mouth expanded. "Nothing the matter with your gates, sir. All right, I assure you. Mr. Fitzallan's gate, I'm certain. Got a parcel for him, weighs eleven stone. Handle carefully, you beggar, or it will die in transit."

Dropping the reins, the young Hebrew dived into the depths of the buggy and hauled at something lying near the bottom. The stockbreeder remained transfixed like one gazing upon some spectral apparition; and at each fresh heave, on the Hebrew's part, his jaw lowered, his brow knitted in sullen protest.

A strange chuckling came from the conveyance as the Hebrew hauled and pushed into a sitting posture the figure of an olive-complexioned young

man in evening dress ; a battered opera-hat jammed about his ears ; an owlsh stare in his confused, drink-inflamed eyes.

“ Wash marrer, Barney ? How long s’h’l we be, eh ? Hic ! All the—hic !—way from Magdalen to home, sweet home ! ”

The Hebrew named Barney shook him violently, smacked the battered opera-hat jovially, and pulled him forward into the light of the buggy lamps. “ Here we are, Eustace, my boy, at the old horsey domicile—dry as a tinder-box and not a whisky in sight.”

Simon crouched back in the darkness of the verandah, staring at the hump of clothes and the battered opera-hat sitting up in the buggy. Even in his drunken deshabelle there was no mistaking Eustace. How the face had changed in three short years ! The laughing, boyish mouth had become slack and senile, the eyes vacuous, blinking like a crone’s. . . .

The young Hebrew tilted him forward as though he were handling a bale of merchandise, rocked him to and fro in playful contemplation. “ Nice boy to come home to your expectant father. Why the devil don’t you say something, Eusty ? Give us a speech, my boy, a speech.”

Simon came forward, his eyes gleaming incredulously, his whole figure palpitating with suppressed shame and vexation. For one moment he refrained from striking the jeering Hebrew figure that rocked his son’s stooping shoulders. He leaned over the verandah rail and looked into the blinking face.

"Get down!" he said to the face. "Come inside, both of you. Do you want my station hands to see?"

Eustace smiled feebly at the grey-eyed little man bending over him. "Been having a shivoo, pater," he hiccupped. "People down the line, you know. Tremendous enthusiasm about me—hic!—Barney Josephs good fellow, pater. You'll like—hic!—him awfully." Eustace sat bolt upright and beamed upon his father and Mr. Josephs. "Awfully rude of you, pater, to stare at Barney like—hic!—that. Shake hands; jolly good fellow."

Pushing aside the young Hebrew, Simon seized his son roughly and half carried him into the dining-room. Here he thrust him on a couch and locked the outer doors savagely.

"Sleep off your poison here," he said. "At sunrise I'll interview the man God has sent me."

Simon returned to the verandah, where he found Mr. Barney Josephs settled comfortably in one of the long stretcher chairs, humming and hiccupping alternately. The stockbreeder was not at that moment disposed to question his son's companion or interfere with his temporary repose. But, as he glanced down at the sprawling legs and arms in the chair, a feeling of repugnance assailed him.

"It seems to me, Mr. Josephs," he began, "that you've mistaken my house for some kind of racing booth. May I ask where you obtained that horse and buggy?" He indicated the sweating animal standing near the verandah rail, its trappings cut and disarranged as though it had been driven

against a barbed wire fence during the journey from the railway station.

Mr. Josephs shook his head dismally. "Sorry for the poor old moke, Mr. Fitzy. Everybody too drunk at Engandine to pay attention. Everybody jolly glad to see 'Stacy. Wrong horse put in the shafts, I suppose. Nearly capsized us at the creek. Devil of a drive in the dark." He yawned violently, then his head fell forward, and in a few moments he was snoring peacefully.

Simon took charge of the conveyance, and led the horse to the homestead stables. There was no sleep for his tortured mind that night. Once, twice, towards morning he glanced into the dining-room at the huddled figure on the couch. Was it possible, he asked himself, that Eustace had become a confirmed drunkard, or was the present condition merely the result of a few strong drinks, pressed upon him at Engandine by his old friends and companions?

In his early struggles Simon had encountered drought and pestilence, and the innumerable hostile forces which rise against settlers in sub-tropical lands. Yet nothing had played on his heart-strings so much as the sight of the drunken youth lying on the couch.

The breaking day brought no relief to his mind. During those chill dawn hours he felt that all his financial losses and successes meant nothing, counted not one straw in the scheme of things while the besotted boy moaned and twisted in his waking agony.

CHAPTER III

TALK ran high in the men's quarters, at breakfast, the next morning. One loquacious stockrider inferred that Simon Fitzallan and the minister had been engaged overnight in a desperate controversy concerning the state of each other's souls.

"They wrestled with each other like a pair of Japs, an' the minister, bein' a lot heavier, got a hammerlock on the boss an' made him swear off drinkin'."

"The boss don't drink, only wine," argued a sun-blackened overlander at the head of the table. "He wouldn't know whisky from painkiller. More'n that, boys, it weren't the minister the boss was word-wrestlin' with," went on the overlander. "This mawnin', as I rode in from the paddick, I spots a pink-face Ikey with a nose-pincher lookin' at some of our cows. A young Jew I took him to be on account of his curiosity. Yew never get a Jew to cross a paddick without lookin' twice at the cows."

A long discussion followed concerning the cause of the young Hebrew's fear of cows. Wong Lee, the Chinese cook, was interrogated, and asked to state definitely all he knew of cows and Hebrews.

Wong Lee, whose education had been neglected,

professed a stoic indifference to cows and wandering Israelites. His Celestial reticence in the matter caused a perfect volley of epithets from the break-fasting cattlemen.

"Hi, you yellow mandarin! Why was that pink-faced Hebrew man looking at our cowses?"

"You speak quick, John, and say all you know about cowses, or we'll cool your blood in the ice chest!"

The Chinaman grinned affably as he pottered in and out the shed with the dishes. References were made to his pitiful mentality and his general inability to rise to the pinnacles of their intellectual discourse. But never once did they jibe at the quality of his oven-baked bread, or his delicious coffee, for Wong Lee was a craftsman in the kitchen—a master in the art of turning tough station beef into savoury curries and stews.

The morning broke hot and cloudless. Scarcely a breath stirred the sombre pines that fronted the homestead gates. The shrilling of cicadas merged into throbbing waves of sound, irritating, depressing to the heat-tortured nerves. Not a shadow relieved the blistering hoof-trodden earth of the sun-scorched yards. The lime-washed pens and stockades loomed starkly in the glaring light. A cattleman, in a blue cotton shirt, rode through the wings of the yard towards the ranges, his muster-whip coiled across his saddle front, his soft-eyed barb slouching in his shadow.

A hum of voices came from the homestead verandah. Mr. Mason, dressed in spotless white

twill, occupied a seat opposite his host at the breakfast table. Next to him, in a suit of many stripes and colours, sat Mr. Barney Josephs, moistening his parched throat from time to time with an olive saturated in anchovy sauce.

Eustace had not come into breakfast. The journey from Brisbane to Wahgunyah had not agreed with him, his father explained. There were too many well-meaning people in the district, and Eustace, poor Eustace, had been compelled to run the gauntlet of their hospitality.

Mr. Josephs preserved a tactful silence during the meal; indeed, his whole manner appeared to have undergone a change during the night. To his host he exhibited an almost cringing courtesy, which was accepted by Simon as an apology for his hilarious conduct of the previous evening. The luxurious surroundings impressed him. Whichever way his glance strayed he beheld evidences of wealth and luxury—wealth in the squadrons of cattle that moved along the lucerne flats of the river bend, power in the sandy-haired little man, whose nod sent the big-bearded horsemen scampering east and west at his bidding.

Simon had been abroad early, giving orders to McNeil, the overseer, in the yard. He had seen Eustace only for a moment, and that sobered young man had pleaded to be excused from appearing at table until later in the day.

Simon spent an unusually busy morning in drafting a mob of cavalry remounts for the Indian market, a business requiring infinite skill and

judgment. Blinding clouds of dust shrouded the stockyard enclosures. Perspiring horsemen galloped on the flanks of the intruding mobs ; the loud rattle of muster-whips sounded like pistol echoes to the slowly recovering Eustace lying in a verandah hammock.

Simon was rather puzzled to account for his son's choice of a companion. The presence of Mr. Josephs at Wahgunyah annoyed him greatly. There seemed to be little in common between Eustace, the scholar and thinker, and a young Hebrew who wore striped clothes and sporting neckties. Approaching the verandah, he addressed his obnoxious guest, who was at that moment dozing in a chair, his heels resting on the newly painted rails.

"Maybe you'd like a ride this morning," he said, banteringly. "It may clear your head and give you an appetite."

Mr. Josephs yawned unresponsively, fingered his heavy gold watch-chain, and shook his head. "I'll put a saddle on a brandy-and-soda," he answered, dismally, "if you'll trot it round, sir."

"I thought you were a sport," laughed Simon. "Ye talked a bit, last night, if ye remember. My hayseed men would like to see ye sit a horse."

Barney squirmed in his chair like one averse to outdoor exercises. Eustace turned uneasily in the hammock, his drink-swollen eyes and face revealed in the hot sunlight.

Simon viewed him sternly, as he thought of the strenuous, quick-witted son he had expected to meet. The merciless sunlight revealed everything

with pitiless disregard for his feelings, the flaccid lips and deflecting chin, the nicotine-discoloured fingers, which appeared to have lost their old-time tenacity. Eustace met his father's glance and flinched under the scrutiny.

"You're not feeling well, my lad." Simon brought his horse closer to the verandah until only the rail separated them. "Is this forlorn feeling chronic?" he asked, with a touch of bitterness.

Eustace wriggled from the hammock, and sat up, his fingers pressed to his temple. "I was nearly poisoned yesterday with the best intentions," he answered, wryly. "I have to apologise, pater, for returning in a condition of mental abstraction," he went on, moistening his parched lips from time to time. "Fact is, I wired you, last evening, about my coming home, but it seems that the poisoners got to work on the messenger and gave him whisky. In the meantime they had given me some."

He pressed his brow tightly and resumed his seat in the hammock. Simon appeared mollified by the explanation. He guessed that the township of Engandine, which formed the southern railway terminus, had given itself a holiday to celebrate his son's home-coming. He resented the fact, however, that people who ought to have known better had compelled his son to drink their villainous concoctions. Engandine was proud of its newly acquired railway, its squatters, and its unrivalled grazing country.

A cart appeared at the homestead gate and drove up to the side entrance leisurely. A man in a soft

felt hat alighted, and began to remove several highly stencilled cases from the bottom. Simon wheeled his horse, and his eyes flashed upon the contents of the cases.

"Whisky," he said, under his breath. "Now," he rode alongside the driver, his face grown hard and threatening, "who ordered that stuff to be sent here?"

Before the driver could explain, Barney Josephs came forward, his pince-nez dangling over his coat lapel, and addressed himself to the scowling Simon. "I took the liberty of ordering it," he began hastily. "A drop of the real stuff won't hurt Eustace or myself, a day like this."

Simon waved him back to his seat. "Take your filth from here," he said to the driver, "or I'll have the lot pitched into the creek. Away with it!"

"Oh, I say, this a temperance party!" Mr. Josephs receded from the infuriated stockbreeder. "And me paying for it, too!"

"There's a Poison Act in this country," was Simon's retort. "And men are allowed to protect their cattle and their sons from the poison purveyors."

The cases of whisky were flung back into the cart, and the driver forcibly hurried through the gate into the road. Mr. Mason came into view at that moment, mounted on an old station horse, and rode leisurely up to the verandah. Dismounting, he wiped his sun-heated face as one who had ridden far in the exercise of his calling. Turning to Mr. Josephs, he smiled good-naturedly.

"The heat is fearful in the bush," he said. "All the moisture seems to have been drawn from my body. And the water at some of these bush humpies is vile. Centipedes in the tanks! I myself distinctly saw several crustacean-like objects rise from the bottom of a water-bottle offered me by a lady. I hope our friend Simon has some ice in stock."

"Ice!" Mr. Josephs shrugged his round shoulders and stared witheringly at Simon standing near the gate. "I'm not complaining about the scarcity of ice, sir; in fact, I was never partial to it except for a bit of skating at home. It's the whisky I'm riled over."

"The whisky?" Mr. Mason eyed him askance. "What whisky?" he demanded guardedly.

Hereat Mr. Josephs related what had happened, and pointed dismally to the cart disappearing over the distant rise. "Now, sir, I ask you if that was a Christian act? Here am I, feeling like a very dead bird in the house of a friend, who won't allow a drop of liquor to a dying man. As a minister of the Church, I ask you," he went on deliberately, "whether it wouldn't have been a graceful act to have allowed just one bottle to stay behind?"

Mr. Mason felt his chin reflectively, as though unwilling to pass judgment on so critical a subject. "I—I would rather not answer your question," he said, after a while. "Although I must confess, at this juncture, that a tablespoonful of good whisky might be considered beneficial from a medicinal point of view."

"Oh, I say!" protested Mr. Josephs. "I hope this isn't a temperance ark. Why, a bird could drink more on a day like this."

Simon returned to the verandah, the heat of battle still in his eyes. Mr. Mason saluted him cheerfully. "I've been to the Bellingers," he said, wiping his hot face.

"Ye have!" The battle-heat stayed in Simon's eyes. "And what had ye to say to the Bellingers, parson?"

"Everything, sir—everything. I preached to them, to David, his sons, and daughter. I preached of the everlasting damnation that awaits the covetous and the stealers of kine."

"They're laughing at ye, parson. I can hear them."

"My dear Mr. Fitzallan, I held them in the hollow of my hand. I am not a Daniel nor a Demosthenes, but"—here the minister smiled sadly at the purple-visaged stockbreeder—"I rubbed it in, and the salt was there, my friend, the salt of God's word!"

"You're welcome to your congregation, Mr. Mason. I intend preaching to them myself shortly with the police at my elbow. Maybe you'd like to attend my sermon?"

The minister's smile evaporated at the stockbreeder's words. He became serious. "Something ought to be done for the girl, Hetty. She knows little or nothing of the hereafter. In all my life, Mr. Fitzallan, I have never met a more perfect specimen of womanhood."

Eustace looked round swiftly, a slight flush showed

on his pallid cheek. He did not speak. A stockman slouched across the yard leading the minister's horse to the stable. From every tree and bush came the terrible shrilling of cicadas. Eustace turned from the intolerable sunglare as though to enter the house; the minister's voice stayed him.

"The godless state of the Bellinger family is a reflection upon me and every minister of the Church in this land. I feel, now, that the Australian back country is full of Bellingers."

"Full of devils!" muttered Simon. "The girl is worse than the men-folk. 'Twas her prying eyes that spied out my blood horse Lochiel. I'll never believe 'twas the men-folk unlocked my paddock gates."

His little outburst surprised the minister, and for a moment or two he remained staring into the stormy red face of his host. "I am very sorry, Mr. Fitzallan," he said, with a sudden touch of humility in his voice. "I lost sight of your feelings towards the Bellingers. I must confess to a mistaken sense of chivalry towards the girl. I cannot think of her as a stealer of cattle. Her manner belies any such thought."

"I don't know about women thieves!" broke in Mr. Josephs abruptly. "But my governor in Brisbane could open your eyes about 'em. Kept a loan office for thirty years, and he speaks by the card. 'The prettier the girl, the bigger the thief,' was what he used to say. My governor lent money on flat irons or old houses; he's in the trade, so to speak."

"So . . . your father's a money-lender!" Simon wheeled upon him slowly, deliberately, a look of unfeigned disgust in his eyes. Now that Mr. Josephs had risen from his seat, he observed, for the first time, that his visitor was no taller than a boy of fourteen. His legs wereshort and stocky, his shoulders round and inclined to stoop; his unshaven chin had a bluish growth on it.

He returned the stockbreeder's glance unflinchingly. "Yes; my father's a money-lender. It's a better game than cattle-punching, I should say. Forty per cent. all the year round, and no risks. Oh, my, I should say it was better than keeping cows!"

Simon shot a glance of inquiry at his son; neither spoke. Mr. Mason busied himself beating away the circle of flies that drifted in from the distant pens. He, too, regarded Mr. Josephs askance.

The young Hebrew appeared unconscious of Simon or the minister's distrustful glances. His confidence warmed as he paced the verandah.

"Yes; there's money in old houses," he continued, blithely. "My governor soon lined his nest at the game. In a few years he was able to put me in the ocean trade."

"As a sailor?" questioned Simon, distrustfully.

"Bless you, no! You wouldn't get me sailorising. Lending money to the passenger jays was my outlook. Some of those remittance men sent out from England were real birds to get hold of."

"You lent them money on the voyage out, and

charged them 20 per cent interest ? ” volunteered Mr. Mason.

“ Lend ’em money at 20 ! ” chuckled Mr. Josephs. “ Why, that wouldn’t cover stamps and correspondence. A pound for the use of a pound cuts fair all round when you study risks.”

“ I’ve seen bushrangers hanged for a smaller crime.” Simon turned away, a look of disgust in his eyes. “ I’ve no patience with professional blood-drinkers, Mr. Josephs. I wish ye good afternoon.”

And Simon rode across the yard to where a small knot of station hands were endeavouring to rope a colt which had been brought in that morning from the outside paddocks.

Eustace appeared to have grown tired of the conversation. With a nod to the minister he returned to the cool of his room, where the electric fan sobbed and purred in the silence.

CHAPTER IV

ALTHOUGH the daughter of David Bellinger loved her bush home, with its surrounding palm scrub and wattle-scented gullies, she still looked back upon the enviable years spent at Miss Cargill's seminary at Toowoomba.

Like most Queensland settlers who once gained a footing on the land, David managed to provide one of his children, at least, with a sound education. Clarry and Martin had been content to ride each morning to Kelly's flat, where the children of the impoverished selectors herded together in a slab-and-bark structure, known as a school. Here a jaded, underpaid young woman imparted to them a little learning under conditions that would have shocked an English schoolmistress.

Very often, during the summer months, the two boys returned home through swirling flood waters and rain-flushed gullies, where the creeks had overflowed, inundating the low country and roads. The business of swimming rivers to imbibe a little learning was not to their liking, especially Martin, who regarded all forms of book-knowledge as pernicious and unwholesome.

David never grudged the hard-earned money that went each quarter's-end to defray his daughter's

expenses at Cargill's seminary. At the end of each term Hetty returned to her bush home, while David noted, with increasing satisfaction, the gradual processes of refinement through which she was passing. From a hoydenish country girl she crystallised into an exceedingly well-frocked young lady. If a girl failed to crystallise at Cargill's after her third year, she returned home to take her place at the washing-up board. Hetty crystallised in her third year, but was compelled to vacate through a report circulated in connection with one of her father's cattle-lifting exploits.

A country newspaper had printed an account of David's career as a pioneer and a free selector, giving details of imaginary conflicts with the mounted police. The story had been copied by a well-known city paper which happened to find its way into the Cargill seminary. Hetty was not asked to contradict the story. The dignity of Cargill's would permit of no explanations. Hetty vacated, and returned to her old bush home to bake and grill chops for her brothers, and to mend her father's working clothes.

Yet David had never heard her complain of the unremitting house work, the hot hours spent over a smoky camp oven, when even the boys' nerves were strung to the quarrelling point in the pitiless heat of the summer.

Het was a worker, they said, and if Cargill's had taught her the art of putting on frocks it had not neglected to develop her latent culinary powers. In Australia a woman receives pardon for many

sins committed if she has learned the art of blazing a mutton-chop. Too often it is parboiled or incinerated.

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David Bellinger was engaged with a spade and rammer filling in post-holes near the front of the cottage. The screechings of Hetty's parrot came from the kitchen, where Martin and his brother sat busily cleaning the stock and barrel of an old carbine which had been picked up some months before in one of the innumerable tracks leading to the ranges.

Martin regarded the weapon critically from time to time, as though to satisfy himself that no rust or grit remained on the barrel or breech.

"Belonged to an old trooper who got bushed last summer," he informed Clarry. "The crows had picked him clean as a whistle; left nothing but his spurs and gun. It ain't often the poor birds get a policeman to pick, but when they do they make a neat job of it."

Hetty came from the kitchen door, and the gleam of the carbine barrel held her eye. "Why are you polishing that thing?" she asked, quietly.

"Goin' to kill that parson chap if ever he comes here again," responded the smileless Martin. "I've put up with troopers and trackers, but my nerves can't stand sermons from fat young men in white clothes."

"He deserves to die." Clarry's eyes held a mischievous gleam. "Shooting's a much easier death

than his sermons. We can't stand 'em no longer, Het."

"Do you mean—you . . . " Hetty paused, white-lipped, her body quivering at the thought. David slouched into view, and braced himself against the verandah post. "Don't heed them fellows, Het. Marto would run a mile from a parson. 'Member how he tried to climb into the harness cask when that little pale preacher man came over from Flat Top: that little gospel feller with the piebald whiskers."

"I was only a boy then," admitted Martin, holding the carbine to his shoulder and glancing along it wickedly. "Didn't have a gun like this, either, or I mightn't have rushed into that cask. You wait till your Mr. Mason shows against the green out there," he added, with a sly glance at his sister.

"He's gettin' you, Het," whispered David from the verandah post. "Give him some of your hard scones to-night, an' kill him afore he can gun the minister. It isn't fair to have a dead minister lyin' about this weather."

"I don't think the scones would kill Martin." Hetty's manner changed swiftly. "Mere bad cooking won't disturb a human ostrich." She surveyed her brother critically from the kitchen door, and nodded meaningly to Clarry. "What's coming over Martin lately?" she asked, innocently. "He's growing like a scrub emu about the neck and shoulders." She turned appealingly to her father, a look of sorrow in her face. "Don't you see a resemblance, dad?" she asked.

"Most uncommon," David answered from a cloud of tobacco smoke. "When I saw him comin' home last month, after his trip north, I said—if you remember, Het—I said, what's the matter with Marto's neck; got a sort of ruffle in it, as if he was goin' to take wing an' fly away."

"That's what you remarked, dad," nodded Hetty, approvingly. "Perhaps if we got some kind of a plaster we might keep the feathers from growing on him."

"It's his new moustache," broke in Clarry, anxious to assist his brother from his sudden dilemma. "He told me last night he couldn't stop it coming. I thought it was some kind of a bird growing on his face," he added, gracefully.

Disconcerted by the volley of ridicule heaped upon him, Martin returned to his first argument. "Ef I settle the parson," he said, slowly, "and invite Mr. Eustace to the funeral it would square us with old Simon."

"Marto, you're gettin' bitter, lad." David edged from the post and shook the ashes from his pipe.

"You can keep your bird jokes, but I'll have my funerals," was Martin's response. "I mention Eustace and the parson because one or two women in this district might miss 'em." He turned his sullen face to Hetty's and found it crimson. The gun in his hand was held straight to the ground. She did not meet his glance.

"I'd give a cartridge for your thoughts, Het," he said, flatly.

"Give her that gun, my lad; she'll put it out of

harm's way." David maintained his pleasant, bantering tone, although his mouth seemed to grow slightly hard at the corners. "You're gettin' quite serious, Marto, since Hannan dropped in. I'm sure Het doesn't know whether this gun talk of yours is bluff or bad temper. Slow down a bit, lad."

Martin made no reply. Balancing the carbine in his left hand he retreated to his own room, and placed it near the head of his bed. He did not come out for some time, and Clarry felt instinctively that the unexpected reference to Eustace had silenced his sister.

Hetty remained near the kitchen door, staring thoughtfully at a small green lizard that glanced at her over the edge of a sun-heated pebble in the yard. Clarry sat on the verandah floor watching his father stitching an old saddle-girth with a piece of thread.

"Eustace will be a great swell these times," he began, suddenly. "He'll be taller than Martin, longer in the leg, maybe, an' a better rider."

"A good, wholesome-minded lad," responded David. "A lad who took some brains to school with him. I hope, for his own sake, they've given him the right kind of eddication, for them English schools send a lot of duffers to the Colonies, jackeroos an' silvertails, an' remittancers by the hundred. It would be a pity if Eustace was tarred with the University brush. I've met a lot of 'em in my day, and they're poor horsemen mostly; awful cooks when you strike 'em in camp. A man's no good

in this country who puts manners before horse-sense."

"What's horse-sense, dad?"

"It's the thing that puts a man to bed in a dry place when his rotten instincts are leading him into a swamp. It's the thing that asks a man to shut a gate when three thousand head of cattle are pining to get out an' lose themselves. It's born in some men, this horse-sense, Clarry; a lot of others are merely eddicated, an' they go about leavin' the gates open."

"Your Mister Eustace hadn't the horse-sense to come home sober." Martin spoke from the bedroom, and his voice boomed canorously in the narrow walled apartment. "I never thought much of him except as a shyster an' a blackleg."

"Not a blackleg," interrupted Clarry, firmly; "nor a shyster either. Didn't he give us the tip, scores of times, when the trackers were after dad?"

"Don't remember," was the sulky response. "I saw him yesterday on the way from Engandine with a Jew-faced peach from Brisbane. Both of 'em drunk, an' the Jew was drivin'."

Hetty looked around, and the flush deepened under the golden tan. She did not speak. David stretched the girth across his knees, folded it carefully, and felt for his pipe. "Well, I'm glad he's home, anyhow. I suppose he's altered a lot?"

"Looked like a man out of an opium joint." Martin came from his bedroom, and his shadow hung in the doorway. "Sort of buckled up about

the eyes. Don't know what his ailment is ; some kind of blood poison', I s'pose."

Hetty's face blanched as though a steel weapon had touched her. The swift change in her did not escape David ; he laughed carelessly at his son's description of Eustace.

" You've been seein' things yourself, Marto. That green tea you swaller by the pailful gets into your eyes—that an' the sheep dip tobaccor you smoke. Sort of stunts your outlook."

" We'll have to get Marto to the seaside for a week or two," ventured Clarry. " Salt air's good for people with jim-jams. It mightn't have been Eustace you saw, Marto," he added affectionately ; " some kind of a bunyip ; eh, Het ? "

Hetty was silent. She looked once at the shadow in the doorway, then returned to the kitchen thoughtfully.

A great silence enveloped the bush. The flocks of parrots had wheeled into the darkness of the pines where the interlaced foliage formed a canopy above the forests. Faint, sweet odours welled up from the leafy gullies ; the very smoke from the house fire was impregnated with the aroma of pine and eucalyptus.

" It's a great land out here," said David to his sons. " Plenty of beef an' bread, plenty of good grass country east an' west." He stood up with the mended girth drawn tightly over his shoulder, his chest thrown out, his eyes reflecting the tremendous vital forces within him. " Each mawnin' I feel like a new man, full of work, an' a likin' for

it. The hardest day is always too short for me. Eh, Marto, you overfed sulker."

He caught his dark-browed son by the shoulder in a fierce, half-loving grip, holding him until a cry of pain brought immediate release. Martin had been thrown from a half-tamed horse a year before, and he winced whenever a hand was laid heavily on his right shoulder.

"I forgot about your fall, lad. Seems to me the bone was never properly set. These bush doctors are drunk half their time," David said, tenderly.

Martin retreated, rubbing his shoulder. "Don't want any bear hugs to-day. Try your grip on Clarry."

"A man must hug his sons now and then," laughed David. "I notice that a bear hugs her sulkiest cub oftenest. You're as full of acid to-day as a green pineapple. Give us a cut of your sheep-dip."

A cloud of sun-illuminated dust enveloped an approaching horseman far down the road. He rode beside the bullock-proof fence until a sliprail was reached. Throwing his bridle-rein over a post, he walked up to the cottage.

"It's Dan Creegan!" cried Clarry. "What's he doing here?"

A frown creased David's brow. Something in his visitor's gait disturbed him. Dan Creegan was known throughout Queensland as a cattle buyer of some importance, a man who supplied the store-keepers on the northern rivers with beef at famine prices. He travelled with horses and steers over

vast stretches of spinifex country wherever the news of gold brought men together. Cattle had made him rich, and he claimed, with pride, that his herds fed half the goldfields of the continent.

He was a lean, angular man, with a wisp of reddish beard that blew back in his face when he rode against the wind. Much heckling and bartering had sharpened his wits. Life in the wind and sun had given him the clear eye and the nerve of iron. David looked over him and coughed thoughtfully.

"Didn't know you were in the cattle-belt, Daniel," he said, greetingly. "I hope you aren't after hawses."

Creegan slouched in from the sun, a ring of corks dangling from his greasy, cone-shaped hat, while the flies danced and circled round. "I'm after beef, David," he began, slowly. "The storekeepers on the Fraser are taking forty tons a month."

The shadow of uneasiness deepened on David's brow. He looked back at Martin over his shoulder almost fearfully. Creegan dropped into a chair, smoking in quick, famished puffs that spoke of abstinence and worry.

"Plenty of niggers at the back of the creek, David. Sign of beef in the district when they're about." His voice had a whining note, with a begging persuasiveness in it that some men adopt when exploiting simple natures.

David waited for him to speak again, knowing from experience that he preferred to make his statements without interruption or comment.

"Fitzallan's stock is feeding well," he continued. "I've been looking at the herd of polled Angus along the creek about a mile from here."

Clarry shuffled his feet and stared across the clearing. David merely coughed.

"There's a big crowd of diggers on the Fraser; they're paying siege prices for beef." Creegan lay back in his chair while the tobacco smoke oozed from his lips slowly. "Now, David," he went on, "can you place fifty head of cattle at the back of Emu Gully by to-morrow night? We'll say seven pounds a head, starvers and scrubbers to count, and no questions asked."

Clarry whistled a trifle mournfully, stopped suddenly, and yawned. It seemed ages before David spoke.

"Your price would suit me," he said at last. "But the fact is, Creegan, I'm settlin' down to breedin' on my own account. I'm givin' the game a rest."

"There'll be no risks," half pleaded the big dealer. "All I ask is for the cattle to be driven to the back of Emu Gully."

Hetty's shadow fell athwart the verandah. Her voice sounded sharp and peremptory after Creegan's whining intonations. "Dad hasn't any cattle. And where do you expect him to get them at seven pounds a-head, Mr. Creegan?"

Creegan winced. "I did not know there was a woman behind me," he snapped. "What's come to your house, David?"

"We've turned religious." Martin spoke from

behind his chair. "You've no chance against the parson, Mr. Creegan."

The cattle buyer smoked furiously, eyeing David askance, and feeling that something had gone wrong with the man who had never failed him at a pinch. Clarry rose from the verandah steps and strolled dejectedly from the house.

David sighed and pocketed his great hands like one whose mind was made up. Creegan rose from his chair, muttering something about women who meddled with men's affairs, and with a surly nod in David's direction, walked towards the sliprail.

Martin was there before him, leaning in a watchful attitude against the post. Hetty regarded him from a kitchen window with flaming cheeks. "He's going to get those cattle for Creegan," she called to her father. "He'll be inside the Fitzallans' fences to-night."

"Well, he's his own master, Het. You can't stop a young hound once he's on the blood trail. Let him go."

Daniel Creegan stayed at the sliprail longer than was necessary to say good-bye. They shook hands finally, and Creegan rode into the dark belt of timber under the hip of the range.

David met Martin in the doorway the moment he returned to the house. "Clarry an' me are goin' to a concert to-night, at Engandine," he said, cheerfully. "We'll be off in a minute or two. Het stays here."

Martin looked at the verandah floor and scratched his ear in an attitude of doubt and wonderment.

"What's the concert for, dad? What are you drivin' at?"

"Music, my lad, music," responded David, bracing himself until he stood half a foot over his heavy-shouldered son. "There'll be a big show of people at Engandine to-night. I want some of those squatter people to see me in the front seats."

"Blamed if I understand." Martin continued to scratch his ear. "Not much profit in listenin' to a gang of piano thumpers. Some people would go to a lunatic asylum to dodge a night's work," he hinted, darkly.

"Marto"—David held his son at arm's length—"I'm going to provide myself an' Clarry with a substantial alibi to-night. I reckon you understand what I mean."

Sounds of suppressed laughter came from the kitchen. Martin tip-toed to the window and peeped in. Hetty was merely dusting some chairs.

After the midday meal Clarry and David brought their horses from the paddock, and started for Engandine. Hetty was not eager to remain alone with her surly brother, so without apologies she saddled her pony, and was soon cantering down the wide track that led to Wahgunyah station.

The sun was slanting towards the ranges; a fierce heat lingered within the jungle of foliage and creepers around her. For the first mile her pony picked its way down the boulder-strewn path with the stealth of an old camp horse. A scent of dried wattle and sun-dried flowers lingered in the stifling

air. Often, as she rode forward, her ear caught the thudding note of axes, where a camp of timber-getters were clearing a space on one of the thickly wooded slopes.

At the foot of the slope the jungle thinned out, revealing a cattle-pad that stretched south as far as the eye could reach. The tracks of kangaroos and wallabies were visible in the sandy spaces. Looking down the long, sun-blighted road, she beheld a strange horse and rider loping towards her.

Her pony whinnied, and capered spiritedly across the track. Hetty's hand grew tight on her rein, and for a space of six heart-beats she scanned the approaching horseman through half-closed eyes.

"Why, . . . it's Eustace!" she cried. "Oh, Martin, Martin, what a liar you are!"

He rode nearer, flicking with his cane the overhanging vines. He had changed more than she had dreamt. The quick cry that was like the call of kinship was only half uttered, leaving a cold, grey feeling in its place. For a moment or two her lips quivered, as one who gazes upon a presence which has grown beyond memory. She stared at him round-eyed, while her pony capered with the freedom of a circus broncho.

Eustace reined in, a little out of breath, she thought, but distinctly handsome and well-seated. Only a bush-born Australian could have matched his casual salutation.

"Hello, Het! Still alive, eh?"



"More than ever, Eustace. Where did you borrow the prad?"

"Hunter, if you please, Miss Bellinger. If you were a couple of hands higher I'd give you a spin to the foot of the hills."

And after three years' absence they fell to talking about the merits of her pony and its dubious pedigree. She had expected him to launch into a learned disquisition on college dons and university professors, for in her spare hours the daughter of David had read and assimilated much that concerned public-school life in England.

While she spoke of the merits of her pony she mentally criticised the man. His clothes were a little too fine for bush wear and tear, she thought. The hot silence oppressed a little. Everything around them suggested infinitudes of sky and plain. Not a sound escaped into the windless vault of blue. A small mob of cattle moved along the grass-bordered creek-edge, and they appeared no larger than squirrels in that vast amphitheatre of hill and plain.

The strangeness of his attire disappeared with every sentence that left his lips. Neither clothes nor universities could alter Eustace, and now that he had come back to the Maranoa the land seemed a little sweeter to her. She had few friends in the district; women and girls were scarce enough, while the young men who lived at Engandine were intolerable to her. At times, when travelling with her father, she had met many handsome young stockmen and even gentlemen overlanders, but Hetty Bellinger had always proved a match, in wit,

and reserve, for the gayest Lochinvar who ever crossed the Queensland border.

Eustace rode beside her, talking quickly and relapsing at intervals into periods of silence. Her judgment of him received many checks and surprises. At one time she detected something of the aristocrat in his bearing. He had grown taller than Clarry, wore clothes of a wondrous cut, and jarred her a little with his imported affectations. Somehow he resembled the picture of a jaded young noble she had once seen on a magazine cover. Only when he looked up did his face reflect the keen intelligence of the man.

"It seems only yesterday since we rode along here," he was saying. "Clarry was with us, do you remember; he wanted to race me for my horse?"

"I remember that the horse he was riding belonged to your father." There was a touch of bitterness in her voice.

Something in her words reddened his cheeks. He laughed very quietly, as if the humour of the thing had not escaped him.

"Clarry isn't so bad, though," she went on. "He is thinking of acquiring a selection up Maryborough way, and becoming honest. Mr. Mason preached at us the other day."

"And Martin?"

"Oh, he's taking his enemies seriously. Talks in his sleep, too. I believe he has discovered that my awful cooking is responsible for his mental breakdown. A travelling quack doctor enlightened him, poor fellow."

Eustace laughed outright. "I always considered your cakes delightful. Martin was always a bit out of tune with the rest of us. He's a born rebel."

"Do you like rebels?"

"Yes, when their pikes are turned the other way, Het. Anything wrong with Martin?" he asked.

"Oh, I want you to give him plenty of bush room when you meet. He has been brightening his gun lately."

"T'sh!" Eustace coloured again, and almost drew rein. "You don't think that?" he demanded quickly.

Her lips tightened as she leaned forward in her saddle. "Are you afraid of Martin?"

"I am afraid of many things," he answered, frankly. "The thought of a stray bullet often rips through my imagination, leaving me very cold, and inclined to be nasty."

"You were not such a coward once, Eustace." Her eyes searched him foot and brow, as though in quest of some strange microbe of fear.

His laugh was so quiet that she fancied he was fooling her. "Hetty," he began, gently, "nine women out of ten ask a man if he is afraid of death. Nine men out of ten will cheerfully answer no. Yet each of those men would wear a troubled look if he saw the red blast of a Mauser bullet a hundred yards from his face. Don't load your mind with that romantic rubbish they send you from the Engandine Library. There isn't a real man in a thousand books you read."

"I'm not taking you for my hero, Eustace. I

hate heroic men." She hung her head slightly, and again the blood showed through the tan of her cheeks.

"I am grateful for that," he said, earnestly. "I will be even more grateful if you will tell me the precise moment Martin intends to stalk me. He bears my pater plenty of ill-will, and he might pot me just to square things, Het."

"He'd miss you in a twenty-acre paddock," she averred with enthusiasm. "He can't shoot for potatoes. Father reckons you'd get him first if it came to a potting match."

"Dear, delightful David," laughed Eustace. "He would gladly arrange our funerals with decency and economy, I feel certain."

"Are you making fun of dad, Eustace? He only thinks you'd shoot straighter than Martin."

If he had not known that a vein of humour ran through the Bellinger family, he might have regarded her confession seriously. He knew that men of Martin's character often talked of shooting without the slightest intention of ever pulling a trigger in anger. He regretted having shown any curiosity concerning her brother's intentions. For he had tacitly admitted that he was afraid.

They reached the flat where the palm scrub was gridironed with many tracks that led east and north and south. Hetty pulled round to the right, nodding a brief good-bye.

"Give my regards to David," he called to her. "Say I expect him to be lenient with our stock in future."

"You are beginning to care at last for your hoofs and horns," she answered, mischievously.

"Yes, we are growing very sane, Miss Bellinger. At thirteen we may feel disposed to rob our own orchard. At twenty-one we are inclined to assist the police in prosecuting trespassers." There was no shadow of a threat in his voice. He spoke calmly, good-naturedly, but behind his pleasant bearing she detected something of the squatter and the landlord.

He watched her ride into the palm scrub where the great wonga vines swung in belts of green across the forest edge. The pure lust of colour held him motionless long after she had gone, the livid shadows, fine as lace-work, where the giant ferns rustled in the sunway. His entranced eye lingered upon the tawny hillocks bordered with blue grass, with here and there a cap of silver-white quartz to break the molten hues of a sunset sky.

The west was streaked with gold and saffron until the dust rose across the ranges, screening it in a blood-red cloud. Eustace turned and rode slowly in the direction he had come. Long before he reached his father's southern boundary the homestead lights were shining through the trees.

CHAPTER V

SIMON FITZALLAN did not surrender his faith in humanity because his son had returned to his home in a state of intoxication. His belief in Eustace was as fixed as the stars. Eustace had reached man's estate, and was entitled to his fling on certain occasions. Simon encountered him in the breakfast-room on the morning after his meeting with Hetty, and Eustace blushed under the swift scrutiny of the steel-grey eyes.

"Who's the jape that came with ye?" was Simon's first question. "To be plain with ye, Eustace, I've no relish for the young man's company. If ye met him at Magdalen, I may tell ye that the universities turn out damned poor scholars and gentlemen."

"Josephs is not an Oxford man," Eustace replied. "I met him on the voyage from England."

"In his capacity as a money-lender, I've no doubt." Simon's mouth hardened; he drummed the table with his fingers thoughtfully. Then, as though conscious of his son's uneasiness, flashed his question without further preliminaries. "How much?" he asked quickly.

Eustace flushed as he dropped into a chair, and for the first time in his life avoided his father's

glance. "About seven hundred pounds, less interest, I make it," he admitted, with a sigh. "Like most of our fellows on the home trip I went the pace. I'm awfully sorry, pater."

"The money's neither here nor there," protested Simon. "It's your want of courage that hurts me. There was no need to trail that man Josephs into my house with his confounded bills and stamps, his rascally pawnshop upbringing. 'Twas bad enough to see you drunk, Eustace, lying like a slum owl at the bottom of the buggy. All that is forgiven; but to have that fellow at my table is an insult I cannot swallow."

"I was hardly aware that he came here," confessed Eustace. "He had some private business to look after in the Maranoa district. Those Rutherfords are in his debt. His father lent them money on their cottage and farming machines. He'll go to-morrow unless——"

"He isn't paid. He shall have his money this afternoon, and be kicked off the premises when his receipt is in my drawer!"

In spite of his harsh expressions Simon's anger evaporated by degrees. His work kept him among the station hands until past midday. In the afternoon Eustace accompanied him to the private paddocks, near the river, where the prize stock of Wahgunyah had been pastured since the winter. A three-mile ride through the sweet-smelling bush and box-tree flats brought colour to the young man's cheeks.

Simon regarded his son with increasing satis-

faction. "You'll be getting into your old form anon," he said. "Man, the city has made pap of ye. I remember the time ye used to break the heart of the wildest outlaw."

Nearing the lucerne paddocks they were met by the station overseer, McNeil, who galloped at full speed towards them.

"Seventy of the polled Angus missing," he cried, excitedly. "I followed their tracks to Euon Creek, and lost them near Emu Gully." He reined in with the sweat of travel on his sun-bitten features. "I followed them until a rifle bullet warned me to go no further," he added, savagely. "They carried arms, whoever they were."

"Fired at ye!" Simon's face seemed to congest with rage. "Are ye sure of it, McNeil?" he demanded.

"It was a carbine or a Lee-Enfield, I'll swear, sir," panted the overseer. "The bullet wasn't far from me either."

"Make a note of that!" exclaimed the infuriated stockbreeder. "What time did the cattle go missing?"

"About eleven last night, sir. It was half-past before I got away from my cottage. The dogs gave notice, so I pushed on, hoping to get sight of the raiders."

"And that rifle bullet sent ye back to me?" Simon swung his horse alongside McNeil's.

The overseer fidgeted uneasily in his saddle. "The man who fired it meant business, Mr. Fitzallan. I'm not paid to face rifle-fire."

"Of course, man, of course. No one's asking ye to put your face against a gun. I'd have given ye a hundred pounds if ye could have sworn to the raiders. Ye have no idea, I suppose," he asked, shrewdly.

"Well, you see," began McNeil, hesitatingly, "I could almost swear it was one of those——"

"That is hardly evidence," came unexpectedly from Eustace. "If you did not see your assailant, how can you honestly swear to anything?"

His quietly spoken words fell like a blast upon Simon. He wheeled upon his son, his lips whitening with rage. "What d'ye know of it!" he thundered. "You that was lying in your bed."

"I merely objected to McNeil's bit of presumptive evidence," retorted Eustace, blandly. "This is a serious business."

"The devil take your objections," stormed Simon. "How am I to get the truth?"

Simon loved his son with the strength of his proud, turbulent nature. He also loved his prize steers and fat heifers, and the news of their loss blinded his reason and self-respect. His thoughts revolved around the Bellingers as he returned to the homestead with McNeil and Eustace cantering beside him.

At the home gate he nodded briefly to his son. "You'll stand out of this affair," he said, stiffly, "for many reasons."

"I have no desire to enter it, pater. All that I ask is that no injustice shall be committed."

"Would ye have me believe that any one but the

Bellingers did it? Is there a man or gang of men in these parts who'd ride into my paddocks and drive away a mob of cattle?"

Eustace appeared anxious to avoid further argument. The sun and the ride had distressed him considerably. Dismounting at the gate, he threw the reins to McNeil, and entered the house.

Mr. Josephs was stretched in a verandah chair. He suppressed a yawn at sight of Eustace, muttered something about the cursedness of the hot weather, and fell off into a doze. Outside, in the shadowless yard, the heat waves quivered and pulsed above the hoof-torn earth. Simon remained at the gate talking in an undertone to McNeil.

Eustace felt certain that the overseer was receiving instructions to proceed to Engandine to inform the police of the recent raid. McNeil rose in his stirrups suddenly, and pointed to something approaching over the scrub-covered incline. The pounding of hoofs came later, long, swinging strokes, unusual to the loping boundary rider or jogging camp horse.

A glance across the heated box scrub revealed Hetty Bellinger mounted on a big bay horse, a cloud of red dust about its feet, foam on its chest and sides. Simon whipped round incredulous and bewildered. McNeil was pointing to the horse she rode, and his face expressed symptoms of temporary mental derangement.

Hetty approached the gate, drawing rein with the skill of a professional horsewoman. Nodding pleasantly to the spellbound Simon, she dismounted,

holding the reins in her left hand. The horse pawed restlessly, cheeked its bit as she swung back the gate upon the astonished McNeil.

"I have returned you your property, Mr. Fitzallan," she said in her clear voice. "The brands have not been altered, but there is some dye on its coat that will sweat out by and by."

Simon brushed past the paralysed McNeil, stooped with a suppressed oath to examine the horse's brands and coat. "It's Lochiel!" he cried, after he had satisfied himself regarding the animal's identity. He turned upon Hetty, his face almost livid in the hot sunlight.

"So, young lady, ye have the impudence to parade yourself in public on my stolen property. Ye ride very well!" he added, with a bitter sneer.

The daughter of David pushed back the gate and led the sweating Lochiel inside the grounds. McNeil took the reins from her in dazed wonder, scarce daring to act further until his employer gave him a sign.

Hetty returned to the road, her dust-veil raised to the brim of her soft felt hat. The bush had impressed its beauty and strength upon the daughter of David, strength so subtle and graceful that it almost seemed to flow in her very movements. Her throat and brow showed milky white against the sun-gold of her cheeks. Eustace caught a gleam in her eyes as she turned in the road. He fancied she was laughing.

Simon followed her a dozen paces, quivering in suppressed rage. "I'll have the matter properly

investigated, young lady," he called out. "The black police will be at your place in the morning."

Hatred of her kind rose in him. The years of strife, the innumerable vexations inflicted upon him by her father and brothers came to him in that moment. He followed her into the road, trembling, out of breath, like one in haste to disgorge the dregs of his enmity.

"Take your presence from this road!" he thundered. "Tell your skulking brothers and father I'll follow them to the hangman's rope. Tell it to them, you——"

"Father!" Eustace stepped from the verandah and stood bareheaded in the sunlight. "If Miss Bellinger has returned your stolen property have the goodness to allow her a peaceful departure. This kind of retaliation is simply indecent, pater."

Eustace spoke with some feeling, for it was evident to him that David's daughter was being judged and castigated for the sins of her father. Mr. Mason appeared miraculously from the rear of the homestead, bearing a bunch of golden wattle in his hand. Something of Eustace's remonstrance had reached him; the unexpected return of the stolen blood horse was revealed to him quickly as he caught sight of McNeil holding Lochiel by the bridle, and Hetty standing a trifle defiantly in the centre of the track.

He addressed Simon in an undertone, and his rapid gestures betrayed his quick sense of justice and humanity. "I feel certain that she has brought herself to this act of restitution through my inter-

vention, Mr. Fitzallan. I beg you to restrain yourself. If it pains and annoys to have your stolen property returned, then I am very sorry indeed for Miss Bellinger."

"That's a weak apology, sir," Simon retorted, hotly. "It pays these robbers to give back one horse and steal seventy head of prize cattle in one day. I want none of your pleadings, sir, nor yours," he added to Eustace. "I'll gaol the whole brood of Bellingers before a week is over. So preach to them while ye have a chance, Mr. Mason." This last shot was delivered with furious gusto by the palpitating stockbreeder.

A sudden impulse came upon the minister, and, regardless of his host's acrimonious glances, he slipped into the road and hurried after the fast-retreating girl. She faced him, flushed but calm, waving him back as though she understood the cause of his following her.

"I insist upon escorting you a little of the distance home," he panted. "I am afraid that Mr. Fitzallan has been over-hasty."

"He thinks I'm posing." She halted a moment and looked back at the homestead. "The old money-bag! I can make dad honest, but no one could make a gentleman of Simon. Good-bye, sir."

He watched her depart a trifle mournfully. Later he heard her singing as she crossed a wattle-fringed hillock; her voice sounded sweet and natural above the mad shrilling of cicadas. Eustace met him at the gate, his face tinged with shame and disappointment.

"Seventy head this morning," he said in an undertone. "David is getting the blame."

The minister looked troubled. "I can scarcely believe that David had a hand in it. He gave his word that he would never touch your cattle again."

"The return of Lochiel has made matters worse." Eustace followed his father's movements as he walked the horse across the yard towards the stables. "He does not appreciate these little acts of restitution. Much better for David if the prad had been kept away."

The news of Lochiel's return spread through the men's huts. In the long history of cattle-thieving no man could recall any similar act. It was a woman's trick, they agreed, to undo men's ill deeds and pose for a little while in the limelight of honesty and assumed virtue. Every one was glad, however, that the horse was back in Simon's keeping.

Hetty proceeded on her way home, her heart throbbing strangely at what had happened. Martin would never forgive her for returning Lochiel to its owner. He was in complete ignorance of her actions, and had yet to learn that Lochiel had been taken from its hiding-place.

The sun beat down from a sky of glassy brightness. All around her lay cairns of pick-torn stone and powder-blasted boulders that marked a long-forgotten mining camp. Ti-tree and bunya pines covered the hill slopes in front. Here and there she turned aside to avoid the giant ant-heaps that barred progress.

A footstep among the stones fell sharply on her

ear; a shadow seemed to leap from the ragged scrub. Mr. Barney Josephs sauntered into view, and his loud breath belied his assumed carelessness of manner.

He raised his straw hat, and the daughter of David looked innocently at the little bald spot on the top of his head. "I hope you don't mind me addressing you," he began, blithely. "I thought you'd be rather frightened of these lonely parts, Miss Bellinger."

He replaced his hat with great suddenness, feeling that her eyes were riveted on his carefully arranged hair. "You have no right to come after me," she flashed. "I saw you on Fitzallan's verandah—behind Eustace."

"Sorry if I was behind him." The young Hebrew laughed hilariously for no particular reason. "Seems to me I'm a bit before him now. No objection to me seeing you home, Miss Bellinger. Must say I admired the way you brought that big horse into the garden. It was a free show; sort of revived me after the beano the other night."

He stood in the track, his legs apart, thumbs in waistcoat, after the manner of a city larrikin or stable-boy. "You had better go back at once," she said quickly. "Only a fool or a drunkard would have followed me so far."

Mr. Josephs certainly resembled both as he grimaced and made play with his large black eyes. Hetty's directness of speech disconcerted him slightly. Wiping his brow, he assumed an apologetic air that in no way helped him to decrease

the distance between them. Drawing a card from his pocket, he held it between his finger and thumb.

"My name's Josephs, Miss Bellinger. Father and I are in the loan and mortgage line. We are prepared to make small advances to struggling farmers and selectors. Perhaps your father or mother would consider our terms."

Hetty regarded him thoughtfully, serenely. "My father never borrows money, Mr. Josephs. I am certain he would never pay interest if he did. You'd better not lend money to my people. They aren't used to it."

Mr. Josephs beamed. "Money's useful to repair tanks, dams, and agricultural machinery, Miss Bellinger. There'd be no harm in your mentioning my proposals to your father. Perhaps you are expecting a legacy from some dear relative," he went on, insinuatingly. "A pretty girl of your sort ought to have a nice grandmother somewhere."

"Never heard of such a person," was Hetty's innocent reply. "What would a pretty girl's grandmother be doing in a place like this?" she asked.

"You generally find 'em where there's chickens and poultry," Mr. Josephs responded, banteringly. "As a favour I'll ask you to hand my card to your father. I've got a number of clients in this district. There's no harm in accepting a small loan to put you over the winter."

She took his card after some hesitation, and resumed her walk. Mr. Josephs returned to Wahgunyah by another track, with the full intention of

calling on David Bellinger at the earliest opportunity.

Instead of proceeding home immediately, Hetty made a slight detour through the bush in the direction of old Marjorie Devine's farm. The back country was dotted with these lonely homesteads, rarely visited by ministers or doctors. Old Marjorie had one grown-up daughter and an idiot son. Her husband had lost the use of his limbs many years before. The little farm was managed by a few kindly disposed neighbours, who took turns in ploughing and harvesting the small crops of maize and lucerne. Hetty Bellinger was adviser-in-chief to old Marjorie. It was Hetty who managed her bees and poultry during her spare afternoons, while David and Clarry took turns ploughing and fencing the land that formed the chief support of Marjorie and her two dependants.

CHAPTER VI

"So you met a chap who wants to lend me some money?" David regarded his daughter quizzingly from the verandah end. "What kind of a fellow might he be, Het?"

"He's the guest of Fitzallan." Hetty showed signs of fatigue after her long walk, and was not inclined to discuss the affairs of Mr. Josephs at length. "I met him on the way home. Here's his card; I had almost forgotten it."

David scanned it curiously, then laughed, as he placed it on the mantelshelf. Clarry yawned from the sofa, where he was lying, and sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"What's the meanin' of this money-lendin', dad?" he inquired, with a sudden show of interest. "What do people lend it for?"

David explained at length the meaning of loans and mortgages as he had experienced them in his early settling days. Clarry listened attentively, but failed to grip his meaning, especially those intricate details connected with cash advanced at high rates of interest.

"It's this way," David went on, anxious that his son should understand something of the business

of usury. "If I lent you a hundred cows at 20 per cent, you'd have to give me back twenty cows a year."

"You'd have 'em all back in five years," Clarry declared, after a brief mental calculation. "You'd lend me another hundred then, eh?"

David blew smoke on the bowl of his pipe and into the air. "Mr. Josephs wouldn't, my lad. You'd give him his twenty cows a year till you died—the job of findin' his twenty cows a year would make you die sooner than usual; an' when you died he or his bailiff would hold your house an' land until the first hundred cows had been handed over. That's Mr. Josephs' business. There are seven or eight people hereabouts who are paying men like him twenty cows a year for the use of a hundred."

"Why, that's a better game than stealin' 'em!" declared the boy. "How often do the police get him, dad?"

"The traps don't worry him, lad. They help him to collect his twenty cows at times. They've taken a heap of trouble to put down bushrangin' in this country, the Kellys an' the Starlights, fr'instance, but they don't seem to lay poison for the people who want to assist the poor farmer with a loan."

The sound of their voices drew Martin into the room. He regarded Hetty's travel-stained appearance somewhat dourly. During the greater part of the day he had been engaged with his father stiffening the bullock-proof fences on their eastern

boundary. Not a word had escaped him in reference to the recent raid. David was too shrewd to question him until circumstances compelled Martin to admit or refute having taken a hand in the business.

Moreover, David had made his visit to the concert at Engandine synchronise with the time likely to be chosen by Martin in his visit to the Fitzallan paddocks. He had been seen at the concert by scores of well-known people, and his presence in the township had practically safeguarded Clarry and himself from any suggestion of complicity in the affair.

Martin eyed his sister shrewdly, watched her into the kitchen, and then turned to his father. "She's been foolin' around the Fitzallans'," he said, gruffly. "There's no need for her to be in that locality."

"She's free to go where she likes, lad. Het's as well balanced in the head as you or me. There's goin' to be no heel ropes for a daughter of mine, Marto," declared David.

"I'm thinkin' there might be a few neck ropes," Martin rejoined, sulkily. "Women do things, an' they're blamed sorry afterwards. Who's the sign-board?"

He reached down Mr. Josephs' card and scanned it darkly. "Some snout of a policeman, I'll bet. They've failed to get us with their black trackers, now they're tryin' us with a flash detective named Josephs."

He pitched the card across the room, and scowled

in the direction of the kitchen. David smoked for several minutes before responding.

"Don't see how the Government could get us by sending a man up from Brisbane to lend us money," he argued, "unless he thinks he can rake up evidence by getting on friendly terms."

It was characteristic of Martin that he never pushed a theme too far, or even allowed his anger to goad him to a fighting-point. He generally retired from a discussion to meditate further attacks from a different vantage point.

The night passed without further argument. Clarry played several games of euchre with his father, while Hetty sat beside them, her busy needle repairing her brother's well-patched garments.

Seldom were they visited by passing stockmen, and the nights were usually spent in innocent games, interspersed with plenty of home-made wit and humour. The cottage itself was well-constructed, and stood on ant-proof piles in the centre of a grassy clearing. Shut off from the road by dense areas of palm and lignum scrub, it was coveted by many of the rich squatters of Southern Queensland.

A great love of the hot, bush-sheltered spaces filled David's heart. His father, one of the early pioneers of Central Queensland, had bequeathed to him a vagabond yearning for the open spaces, the love of mountains and plains, and the unutterable tranquillity of a forest home.

Hetty inherited this forest love from her big-hearted father, the morning ride through the blue

grass of the Maranoa, the acrid smell of wood-smoke at dawn on the edge of some wattle-scented gully or creek bank. Often she had ridden with her brothers, when the troopers were in full cry, through unbroken zones of eucalyptus, and over stony ranges to freedom and safety. It was David's bushcraft that saved them always. His knowledge of the country was phenomenal. From the Daly River to the Condamine every track and gully was known to him, a fact which every trooper acknowledged the moment David's name was mentioned at headquarters.

Mr. Mason's visit to their household had affected father and son in a marked degree. It was rarely that a minister of any kind presented himself at their door. And David had really taken to heart the brief castigating sermon delivered on his verandah by the well-meaning young parson in the sun-helmet.

"Do you expect to go on stealing for ever," the minister had said, "that which belongs to another? Is it not time that your children should feel the shame and dishonour of your life? Do you not feel it yourself?"

David had responded innocently enough in the negative. He stated, however, that he would prevent, as far as possible, any further raiding of Simon Fitzallan's paddocks. Martin had not acquiesced in this excellent resolve. The rebel in him knew no compromise while there remained an unbranded heifer or steer in the outlying ranges. Neither would he settle definitely to work at farm-

ing. One day he would be at the plough following the two roan horses along the sun-baked furrows, the next would see him scouting for hoofs and horns in some grassy hollow among the hills, where the wild cattle roamed in scattered mobs.

The morning following Hetty's meeting with Barney Josephs saw Martin and Clarry riding towards the ranges. Clarry accompanied his taciturn brother, unquestioningly, knowing that something was afoot, which would be revealed only at the journey's end.

The country grew broken and precipitous as they pushed north. Forest-sheltered gullies flanked the approaches to the hills. Here and there the palm scrub thinned out, revealing leagues of spinifex-covered flats and depressions. At the foot of the hills Martin exhibited signs of his brother's presence.

"I'm getting tired of dad and Het," he said, huskily. "Dad's losing his nerve; Het's runnin' about the country feedin' the police with information."

"I'd like to see the policeman who could worm anything out of Het," Clarry protested. "Dad isn't losing nerve either, Marto. It's all there in big fat bunches when it's wanted."

Martin seemed to pass over his brother's statement. The muscles of his jaw relaxed and tightened alternately. "Being tired of home life," he went on, "I'm thinkin' of settin' up in business for myself."

"Right-oh," assented Clarry. "But don't count me as a partner. I'll hang on to dad until his

whiskers fall out. He's kept us from the johns so far. There's no fireworks about dad, Marto."

"I don't want you to break with him. I'm tired of home, that's all. Reckon I'll join hands with Dan Creegan. He'll buy all the scrubbers I can cut out."

"The last affair isn't over yet," predicted Clarry. "Simon has telegraphed for more johns. They'll be sniffing around next week."

"I'm gettin' ready," growled Martin. "Come an' see the place I've fixed up."

They rode along a narrow boulder-flanked ledge, under the hip of the range, for nearly a mile. Everywhere around lay mountainous masses of stone. A few rock wallabies peeped at them from the fern-darkened crannies, while above, in the cloudless ether, a brown eagle floated towards the scarce visible roof of jungle in the far north.

The horses picked their way along the narrow ridge, where the eerie silence was broken by the clatter of displaced stones tumbling into the gorges below.

Martin led the way down a dizzy side-track which ended abruptly in a cavern-like enclosure that seemed to penetrate the eastern slope of the range. Dismounting he entered, followed by Clarry, until a turret-shaped apartment was reached that overlooked with many spy-holes the tremendous amphitheatre of plain and mountain-side.

"My little place," Martin growled, indicating, with a touch of pride, the spacious, smooth-walled interior of the turret. A score of water-worn holes

gave vantage-point to every track and ledge leading to it. A bed, supported by a sapling frame, stood in one corner. Several sporting prints and race-horse pictures relieved the sombre walls. To Clarry it appeared almost impregnable in its isolation, and he marvelled that its existence had hitherto escaped him. His vanity was hurt a little.

Martin laughed for the first time in many days, and drew out his pipe with a gesture of smug content. "Safe as a barracks," he said. "You could wipe out half the Queensland police before they arrived at you."

"But the black trackers would get you at night," ventured his brother, critically. "You couldn't feed a horse within a mile of here; there's no grass." He peered through one of the loopholes at the wide expanse of country beyond. "Don't see how you'd get away either," he continued, "if the johns once got round you."

"Dry up," growled Martin, still unruffled. "Because dad didn't find it you rekcon it's no use."

"Bet my horse against yours he knows all about it," challenged the other. "There isn't a stone heap this side of the Flinders he doesn't know."

Martin smiled tolerantly as he started a fire in one of the chimney-like recesses. In a few minutes the smoke was being drawn into the sunlit air above. A billy was placed on the fire, pannikins were produced from a shelf in the corner, and in an incredibly short space the tea was steaming beside them. Martin filled both pannikins and nodded invitingly to his brother. "Have some," he said;

“there’s a bit of johnny cake on the shelf. I’ve stowed away enough tucker to last a month. Afterwards we’ll see how Lochiel’s gettin’ on.”

Clarry wandered in and out the rocky fortress admiring the cathedral-like spires that flung their pointed shadows far across the mountain-side. Outside the heat was almost unendurable, yet within this dark gallery of water-pierced stone and quartz the air was cold and delicious to breathe.

Martin seemed at home as he sprawled full length on the cool rocky floor of the apartment, a listening expression in his gipsy eyes. The two horses stamped and cheeked their bits outside, while the sound of water filtering through a hundred holes in the walls made strange music in the vast silence.

“Marto”—Clarry spoke from the end of the gallery, a pannikin of hot tea in his hand—“would you kill a trooper if he followed you too close?”

The listening blindness in Martin’s eyes faded. He did not alter his position on the floor, one hand clasping his pipe tenderly, the other clenched unconsciously at his side.

“Would you, Marto,” insisted his brother, “if it came to a pinch?”

Martin shifted, and his lips were slightly indrawn. “If the trooper was too close, an’ the cattle were in front, ye-e-s,” he drawled. “I shall never make a mistake about a policeman.”

“You’d—you’d shoot, Marto?”

“Ye-e-s. Twenty years in quod for cattle

liftin' would be hell to fellows like us—used to plenty of fresh air and good tucker. I'll never go quietly while there's a cartridge left."

Clarry appeared depressed. With all his evil moods and fits of sullen resentment, he loved his slow-voiced, taciturn brother. Martin and he had never quarrelled; there had been differences of opinion, misunderstandings, and sharp words perhaps, but in their longest day of peril and disappointments Martin had always faced the music, had fallen behind to do the rearguard work.

Leaving the fire to smoulder in the cavern chimney, they gained their saddles and rode cautiously in the direction of Wilga Gully, where Martin had "planted" Lochiel only a few days before.

Wilga Gully had been considered an undiscoverable hiding-place for a stolen horse. The most expert black trackers had failed to trace missing cattle once they were fairly within its sheltering gorges. Several branches of the Maranoa flooded its environs at certain seasons, making tracking almost impossible.

Descending the mountain slope, they pushed through a shallow torrent that roared and swirled past giant boulders and uprooted trees. Scores of flame-crested parrots screamed among the dark foliage that sheltered the hillside.

"No wonder the police give it a wide berth!" Clarry gazed at the mighty chasms of riven earth and rocks in wonder and fear. Forging another torrent, they entered Wilga Gully at a canter. Martin led the way until a green park-like enclosure

appeared at the valley-head. Scanning it from end to end, he reined up with an oath.

"Why . . . the horse's gone!" he shouted. "Lifted an' gone!"

A great silence enveloped the valley. High above, the sun rode in fierce splendour, striking down into the wind-sheltered depths with tropic fullness. Martin was on the ground in a flash, scanning the hoof-dotted earth around him. For several minutes he remained in a half-kneeling posture, his bushman's eye following the tracks to the head of the valley.

"Het's been here," he said in a thick voice, "with that pigeon-toed circus pony of hers."

Clarry stared at the pony's unmistakable hoof-prints, scarce daring to breathe. "She'd hardly come here by herself, Marto. There's more than one pigeon-hoofed pony in the country."

Martin gestured impatiently, and stabbed the tell-tale earth with his finger. "See here and here, the mark of the old split-headed nails her pony wears in its front shoes! She took 'em out of my tool-box. . . . She's stolen the horse we risked ten years for!"

Clarry was convinced that no argument of his would alter his brother's views in regard to Lochiel's disappearance. That his sister was capable of the most hare-brained tricks he was aware. Yet even in her wildest moments she would not dare remove the horse which had almost cost them their liberty to obtain. Martin stood beside his horse, his lips showing pale at the corners. "I don't know why

she played this game on me," he said, bitterly. "What has she done with the horse?"

Clarry hung back as though speech were unsafe. The look in Martin's eyes was new to him. For the first time in his life he felt afraid. Martin shrugged, braced himself again and again, like one flinching under the lash.

"If she weren't my sister I should say she was workin' for the police. Clarry, my boy, I'm goin' home."

Clarry followed his dark-browed brother after the manner of a frightened child. They rode helter-skelter for a couple of miles before he found courage to speak. Once on the home track he jerked his brother's bridle arm.

"You'd better not broach this to Het till you've calmed a bit, Marto," he pleaded. "Think it over; sleep on it," he suggested.

Martin rode on fiercely, his face towards the homestead. But the last mile seemed to steady him, and before they reached the gate he had regained something of his old reserve and caution.

Clarry's pacific voice flowed in his ear until they arrived within fifty yards of the house. Then his tone changed to a warning note.

"If you put a finger on Het, Marto, dad would welt you into a mince poultrice. He reckons we're only boys just now."

Martin grunted an inaudible reply as they dismounted at the door. David strolled from the house, and his eye fell lightly on his son's darkened face.

“ Been havin’ a look round the world ? ” he began, cheerily. “ Plenty of grass an’ water up Wilga way ? ”

“ A few blades,” Martin growled as he approached the door ; “ enough to feed a horse’s ghost if it felt hungry.”

“ I’ve been for a canter myself,” went on David, his hand gripping Clarry’s bridle. “ Had what you might call a surprise experience. Down at Echo Gully I met Mr. Eustace.”

Martin turned sharply, and was about to speak, but turned with a shrug to the door.

“ Well, say on, my lad,” prompted David. “ Don’t consume too much smoke. What’s the matter, anyhow ? ”

“ Nothin’. I thought p’raps you’d start invitin’ him here again.”

“ There’s no need to get purple neck over it, Marto,” laughed David. “ I’m best judge of the men I shall leave alone or cotton to. Eustace never yet put on dog airs. I’m just sayin’ I met him.”

“ Hope you like the colour of his skin, dad.” Martin laughed to himself, as though pleased with his own remark.

“ Oh, his skin was better than the hawse’s he was ridin’. I never did fancy you as a dyer. The hawse Eustace was sittin’ on,” continued David, with painful deliberation, “ showed up somethin’ awful in the daylight. He was chestnut in places, roan in others, an’ when I looked at his feet I see that they were greenish blue, where the derved stuff had run down. No, Marto, I didn’t refuse Eustace’s hand because he was riding Lochiel.”

Martin regarded his father unmoved. "Dad," he said quietly, "I'm leavin' this house in a day or two. It's gettin' a bit sultry."

"We'll be sorry to lose you, Marto. Hope you've thought it well over."

Martin made no answer as he passed indoors. Hetty appeared from the kitchen, and met her father's glance. The old cattle-duffer merely lit his pipe, and settled himself comfortably in the big verandah chair.

"It's goin' to be a coolish evenin'," he remarked to Clarry.

It was.

CHAPTER VII

" IF you'll send Mr. Josephs to me I'll pay him his seven hundred pounds." Simon Fitzallan was arranging a pile of way-bills on his office table. Eustace was seated at a small desk beside him busy-ing himself with a mass of correspondence relating to road repairs and fencing operations in connection with the station's yearly contracts. Eustace rose and halted for a moment at a sign from his father.

" We'd better get this jape out of the way, Eustace. The police will be here to-morrow, or the day after, to sift that affair of mine. He's likely to be in the way."

Since his stay at Wahgunyah Mr. Barney Josephs had spent most of his spare time in the vicinity of the Bellingers' homestead, a fact which had not escaped the notice of Simon's vigilant stockmen.

" He seems to be in love with this part of the country," Eustace ventured from the doorway. " Refreshing to meet even a money-lender who really enjoys our bush solitudes."

" Bush fiddlesticks !" cried Simon. " The fellow's hanging after Het Bellinger. McNeil told me he followed her the morning she brought Lochiel home, and stood yabbering to her for a quarter of

an hour. Bad enough when the station rouseabouts make sheep's-eyes at the woman without my guests throwing themselves in her way."

Eustace flushed at his father's words. It had not occurred to him that Mr. Josephs might have an object in wandering among the fern-darkened gullies near the Bellingers' cottage. To him Barney was merely an interesting lout, who had obliged him with certain loans during the voyage from England to Australia. From the hour of his arrival at Brisbane the young Hebrew had clung to him with more than brotherly regard, although Eustace had not stipulated a settlement of accounts until a month after his home-coming.

Each day since his return Eustace seemed to grow stronger, and more eager to be in the saddle with the men at their labours. Simon had watched him, covertly exulting in his appetite for work—the growing interest he displayed in the multitudinous little problems incidental to the management of a big cattle-run.

Simon had been too busy to remember the pressing needs of Mr. Josephs. The theft of his prize herd, from the river paddocks, had concentrated his whole faculties on the problem of their instant recovery. Trooper Hannan had ridden in to report that none of the missing stock had been recovered. Their tracks had been followed to the edge of the Consuelo plateau, where all traces had finally disappeared within an unexplored region of mountain and jungle.

David's presence in the concert-room at Engandine,

on the night of the raid, went far to establish his innocence, although there were grave doubts concerning the exact whereabouts of Martin at the time. Mr. Mason had taken his leave of Simon the morning after the scene with Hetty at the sliprail. The demands of his scattered parishioners were urgent, for he frequently visited parts of the country where white men and women lived under conditions approaching barbarism and savagery.

Eustace was strangely affected by his father's report of Mr. Josephs' wandering habits. Fully aware that the young Hebrew was on business bent among the farmers and settlers of the Maranoa, he could not imagine the high-spirited daughter of David tolerating for an instant the jaunty little cockney with the pince-nez. He had heard from McNeil, the station overseer, that Josephs had been seen loitering in the vicinity of Echo Gully, one of the beauty-spots of the district, which lay about a mile from the Bellingers' southern boundary.

Within its pine-shadowed recesses were innumerable grottoes of fairy-like beauty. From its torrent-scoured floor Eustace had often gazed upwards at the groups of lean palms silhouetted against a turquoise sky, the curtains of lace-like creepers that hung between the straight-limbed trees. Echo Gully had always held a certain pagan charm, the charm of vine and orchid, of crimson cassia-trumpets and grey-winged herons standing in the blue grass at the foot of a down-leaping cascade.

He assumed that Hetty might be treating the young Hebrew to a will-o'-the-wisp flirtation some-

where within the gully. He recalled the joyous hours spent within its leafy nooks before he had gone to Oxford. The mystery of its acoustics had always been a source of wonder to Hetty and the boys, for once a shout was uttered the echoes were repeated indefinitely.

Eustace crossed the station-yard in search of the elusive Barney, and discovered him returning down one of the little-used side tracks leading from David's cottage. The sun had burnt his tender skin in places. His straw hat drooped over his brow; something in his jaunty bearing struck harshly upon the young Oxonian.

Leaning over the sliprail he lit a cigar with the ineffable ostentation of a prosperous city man. Eustace noted the strong Hebraic tendency of his features as he puffed the slow-burning weed, holding it to his nose with the gusto of a connoisseur. Turning slowly, he regarded Eustace with a certain cockney freedom of manner.

"Well, my pretty; why aren't you out in the open acquiring a healthy appetite?" he demanded, slyly.

"My appetite will scarcely survive your bill of costs," Eustace retorted, smilingly. "I hope you are enjoying yourself."

"Never better, my boy. Everything in the garden's lovely, beasts, birds, and ladies."

His pronounced vulgarity struck Eustace as infantile. There had been moments on the voyage out when he had regarded the young Hebrew as an interesting and volatile companion. Now, with

his senses beating a saner tune, he began to view his presence with uneasiness not unmixed with loathing.

Mr. Josephs entered the house-gate, swaggering as he came. On the broad verandah steps he paused to execute a little cake-walk, his straw hat tilted forward.

Eustace leaned over the verandah rail, and watched him carefully. "After your symphonic exercise, the bill. I presume you have it in your pocket?"

Mr. Josephs' dancing ceased instantly. A peculiar metallic gleam brightened his eyes; his bantering manner changed to an assumption of mild subservience.

"Eustace, my boy, I'm not hurrying you, I hope. We're not the hawk variety of money-lender, you know. Father wouldn't like to think I was pushing you."

"Not in the least," murmured Eustace. "The pater is waiting for you in his office. Go in now; you'll get his cheque immediately."

Mr. Josephs' chest expanded to its narrow limits. "Right you are, my boy; but don't forget an old friend whenever you run short of the needy. B. Josephs, Esquire, Sydney, Brisbane, and Rockhampton. From a fiver to a thousand at lowest rates."

"My dear chap, the Eustace boy has all the wealth he is ever likely to want in this world. When you have received your cheque——"

"Oh, I'll be off, my boy. I've got to hunt up some people in the district; a matter of a few hundred pounds or so."

"Poor devils!" sighed Eustace. "Some people avoid death and disaster only to meet the money-lender. When are you leaving here?"

"To-morrow, with your permission. I want to see a young lady before I go." Mr. Josephs' mouth widened expressively. "No names, dear boy, in this case, no names. I must look at her again before I go."

Herewith the self-contained young Hebrew hurried to his room to prepare for his brief business interview with Simon Fitzallan. A slight depression seized Eustace. The money-lender's presence affected him with nausea. The world that was edged with palms and blue grass became a circle of yellow shapes and formless masses. With a sick man's introspection he saw that his life had been a bleak failure. Worse than all, his father had left him nothing to accomplish. Even the settling down to hard work as a pastoralist only meant the adding of a few more thousands to his father's bulging exchequer—or his own, it was all the same.

As far as his eyes could reach across the forest and flat there were cattle and horses waiting to be converted into gold for his enjoyment. Inconceivable as it may seem, his manhood shrank from his splendid heritage. He wished almost that he had been born like Clarry or Martin Bellinger.

His father's voice reached him from the office, and he knew that Josephs was receiving his seven hundred pounds with 20 per cent added. Later on, Simon came to the office door, and his voice rang clear through the hot silence.

"One of my men will take your luggage from here to the station, Mr. Josephs. The favour will not cost ye 30 per cent. either. I wish ye good morning."

"Thirty per cent!" muttered Eustace. "The little Shylock!"

Simon joined his son at midday, and his manner bore no trace of his interview with the bill-discounting Hebrew. Indeed, for one who had been called upon suddenly to pay a heavy sum, he behaved with a certain forbearance and good-humour.

"I'm thinking of sending you to Parliament, Eustace," he said, across the table. "I've only to hold up my hand, and the district would elect you unopposed."

Simon glowed with the thought, sipped a little wine, and pushed the bottle to his son. "What d'ye think of the notion?" he urged. "Parliament and a title in three years, or I'm the biggest waster this side of New England."

Throughout the long dinner hour Eustace listened to his father's rhapsodies, scarce daring to repudiate the many brilliant suggestions put forth for his approval or condemnation.

Eustace escaped from the table with a sense of his utter inadequacy to rise to the sublime heights of his father's visioning. He filled in a long afternoon with McNeil, inspecting tanks and dams, and found the work to his liking. He slept well that night, and dreamed that his father had compelled him to address a meeting of pastoralists and squatters at Engandine. Other portions of his dreams were

filled with pictures of his first meeting with Barney Josephs, his conversation with Hetty Bellinger the day he had met her in the bush.

His appetite at breakfast was in no way impaired by his dreams. Something in the brilliant morning air beckoned him out of doors. A troop of magpies sat insolently on the homestead gate chortling as he strolled up and down, while a cool wind from the east made silken sounds among the interlaced vines and branches.

Taking his father's rifle, together with some cartridges from the storeroom, he sauntered into the bush, feeling that a bit of shooting would vary the monotony of station life. Scores of wallaby abounded in the gullies, scrub turkey in abundance, if he cared to walk beyond the big pine thickets at the back of Echo Gully.

In the bush itself everything was still as the depths of a valley. The interlaced wonga vines shut out the sun. Flocks of pigmy geese and squatter pigeons trailed away in whirring clouds long before his rifle could cover a single bird. Striking across country in an easterly direction he entered Echo Gully from the extreme southern end. Here the scent of boronia greeted him like an old friend. His sensitive eyes gloated on the finely pencilled palms, beautiful as virgins in that fern-darkened abode. Out of the drowsy silence above came the rustling drone of the bee myriads passing overhead. His eye followed the swarm until they settled in a golden mass on a naked blue gum at the head of the gorge.

He approached them inquisitively, until he caught sight of a dark honey patch showing below the lightning-blasted crest of the tree. Turning, he thrashed through some tangled undergrowth until he reached a well-worn path that led to the Bellinger homestead.

A sigh escaped him at the memory of the bitter feud that existed between his father and David. How much better, he thought, to meet neighbours in a frank and open manner. All the culture and learning of Oxford had not effaced his boyhood impressions and affections—Clarry, with his towzled hair, his half-laced boots and friendly eye, came to him with every breath from the pine slopes. Martin was not so amenable. Yet he felt certain that a little friendly intercourse with David's dour son would lead to a better understanding.

Hetty was almost his ideal of Australian womanhood, a fearless horsewoman, quick-blooded as an Italian, and with something of the rebel in her blood. Eyes of fire and mist, a slip of a girl who could scorn his father's anger, smile in his face while returning the horse which her brother had stolen some weeks before.

A crackling in the bragalows ahead halted him instantly. The curtain-like folds of the wonga vines and creepers were thrust aside as though an impatient animal were crossing his path. A moment later the head and shoulders of Mr. Barney Josephs came into view, his face turned in the direction of the Bellinger homestead.

Hot blood surged in Eustace's cheek at the fellow's

proximity. The morning air seemed charged with some peculiar taint since his arrival. Drawing his rifle after him, through the clinging vines, Eustace sought to escape unobserved into the dark pine clump on his left. The bush parted at his touch, but the imp of mischance, in the shape of a low-swinging creeper, caught his gun-trigger, snapping it as he stepped forward.

A sharp explosion filled the gully; Eustace stumbled as though the recoiling weapon had struck his chest. The echoes of the report reverberated through the dark recesses as if a squad of riflemen were firing from some hidden coign of vantage. To Eustace the echoes seemed without end; up and around him they beat with an eerie, slamming sound that irritated him to the point of frenzy.

Steadying his shaking limbs, he peered over the low bushes in front, waited with a palpitating heart for Josephs to show himself again. The sound of the rifle had scared him no doubt, and he laughed a trifle hysterically at the thought of the young Hebrew cowering within the adjacent fern cover. Drawing himself up slightly, he strained over the interlaced screens of foliage.

"Are you there, Josephs?" he called, softly. "What the deuce are you doing? Speak up, old chap; don't be afraid!"

With the smoking rifle under his arm, he scoured the fern cover for a glimpse of the young Hebrew. Tearing aside a mass of tangled ferns and lawyer vines, he peered with avid eyes into the opening.

Barney was lying half on his side, his knees slightly

updrawn. The upturned face revealed a tiny blue mark on the brow; and as Eustace gazed, fear-stricken and transfixed with horror, he observed a faint crimson thread trickling down the side of the face. He had confronted dead things in pictures and books, had read with unconcern the stories of Turkish and Armenian atrocities, of men and women butchered and mutilated beyond human semblance. But nothing that he had read of or seen had appeared so dead and voiceless as Barney Josephs. There was no doubt in his mind concerning the cause of death. The bullet from his accidentally exploded rifle had found a resting-place in the young Hebrew's brain.

A speechless inertia seized Eustace Fitzallan as he knelt beside the huddled shape in the fern cover. Only a moment before it had throbbed with life and energy. A bullet no bigger than his finger-point had sundered for ever that mysterious instrument of energy which men called life.

All in a moment, in the twist of a piece of vegetable fibre that dangled like a hangman's rope from the branches of a half-grown eucalyptus. Eustace stared, fascinated by the tiny blue hole in the white brow. He could have cried out at the thing. His thoughts ran in wild circles, like maddened horses seeking to escape some frightful menace, returning always to the starting-point, the point where Death sat—the inescapable blue hole no larger than an ordinary thimble.

Scores of startled parakeets hovered above the tree-tops filling the morning silence with shrill cries.

A pair of grey herons fluttered close in and stood perched on a wet ledge of rock where the palm shadows sloped, plume-like, above.

Some men run in despair from the scenes of calamity ; others hover with fearful inquisitiveness near the dread object of their terror. Eustace was morbidly attracted to the immovable figure with the updrawn knees. A childish expectancy illumined his eyes ; at intervals, a thought that Josephs would turn, cry out, stretch forth his arms

Not for worlds would he have touched the huddled figure, the warm flesh that seemed to palpitate with life. The palm shadows grew longer, where the tropic sunlight inundated the open spaces and recesses under the shelving rocks. A wallaby peeped from above at the man sitting near the fern cover, then hopped away into the pine-shadowed darkness.

The heart of a continent appeared to throb in that lonely hollow. Overhead the sky had grown livid in the heat of noon. Sometimes a breath of wind stirred the spike-crowned palms until they beat and tapped like approaching footsteps. Once or twice Eustace rose and glared with frightened eyes in the direction of the Bellinger homestead ; a solemn, metallic clang rewarded his curiosity, the slow, monotonous dirge of a belled steer returning from a distant water-hole.

He rose from his kneeling position with a dull pain shooting through his knee-joints. For ten or twenty paces he staggered forward without daring to look back. He felt that his life had been cut in

half, his future demolished by the mere snapping of a trigger.

"My God . . . no one will believe me!" he muttered. "I can't believe it myself. The gun, I'll swear, was pointing to the ground!"

He dared not think or question his next move. He must go home and settle the matter with himself. Again the thoughts in his brain began their mad stampede, scurrying from point to point, in their wild haste to escape the dead thing in the fern cover with the tiny blue mark on its brow.

CHAPTER VIII

THE cattle dogs skulked in the shadow of the out-buildings, where half a dozen weary stockriders had foregathered after the biggest day's mustering of the season. Simon had retired to his office to finish his week-end correspondence, and to enjoy the one cigar he allowed himself after a hard day in the open.

Throughout the afternoon he had been turning a thought in his mind that grew and dominated him the more he examined and tested it. It had occurred to him that the whole of the Bellingers' selection might be acquired and joined to his own if a reasonable sum were offered for it. Having gained possession, he could stock it, and allow Eustace and his overseer, McNeil, to manage it on their own lines. Complete ownership of an estate would give his son an abiding interest in the land, would place him on his mettle, blood him to the stern realities of life.

David's land was the pick of the district, and contained some of the finest cedar preserves in Queensland. Much tact would be required in approaching the Bellingers, especially at a time when the troopers were scouring the country after his missing cattle.

Simon brooded over the scheme, marshalling every possible objection to its purchase, weighing, balancing, with the keen foresight of a successful landowner, the benefits or losses likely to accrue from any newly acquired holding.

A Chinese servant entered the office to switch on the electric light, and to adjust the mosquito-proof doors for the night. He remained beside Simon's chair for several moments, his yellow face wreathed in tender smiles.

"Missa Eusta' not home to-night," he purred softly. "No dinner, no tea, sa'; welly long time away."

"Don't worry about Eustace, John." Simon regarded his old servant with amused interest. "He'll be here shortly demanding beef and wine. Did ye cook a joint this evening, John?"

"Yes, sa'; one welly plime circle of beef. Sweet potato welly ni' chocolate an' mango puddin'. Me welly goo' cook, sa'." The Chinaman retreated to the door, and his white silk clothes shimmered under the electric globes.

Simon pondered while the Celestial stayed with his hand on the door, awaiting the last order for the night. "Bring out some of the fifth bin claret, John," he said at last. "I'll dine with Mr. Eustace when he comes. How's the tobacco in the stores?"

"Plenty Havana, sa'; plenty Cuba ciga'. Melican smoke welly sick just now."

"Yes, those green Virginias that came along last week are mighty sick, John. Give them to the men in the huts. You may go."

The Chinaman withdrew, leaving Simon wrapped in thought, his half-smoked cheroot lying in the ask-tray at his elbow. A soothing quiet pervaded the homestead. One or two lights pricked the darkness about the distant huts ; a faint odour of burning wood lingered in the soft night air. Far away in the south a nimbus of light showed against the sky, where the township of Engandine snuggled in the hollow of the ranges.

A footstep on the verandah outside roused Simon. Glancing up, he saw Eustace fumbling with the knob of the mosquito-proof door. Simon sat up in his chair.

"Come in," he said, with suppressed good-humour. "I've something to say that may interest ye."

Eustace turned swiftly, glanced back over his shoulder, as though fearful of being followed. Entering, he stood white-faced, immovable, staring at his father, his chest labouring like one who had stumbled and fallen in the dark gullies and claypans.

Simon's exuberance faded instantly. He sat bolt upright in the chair, blinking a little at his son's scared visage, the palsied, nerve-shaken hands clutching at the sides of a chair.

"What have ye seen, man?" Simon demanded sharply. "Speak out. Are ye sick?"

"I've had an accident, pater. A horrible thing has happened . . . in that gully. . . . Echo Gully. I went there after wallaby ; and that idiot Josephs crossed me in the fern scrub. My rifle exploded accidentally . . . I can hardly believe, hardly see how it could have happened. I can't really. . . ."

"What in Heaven's name can't ye believe?" Simon rasped out. He stooped forward and grasped his son's arm. "Eustace," he said, in a peculiar, plaintive voice, "have ye been drinking again? And after all ye promised?"

Eustace pressed his brow with his finger-points; his olive skin had become livid, while his clothes showed signs of his hasty scramble through heavy undergrowth of thorn bushes.

"My rifle exploded . . . and that fellow Josephs was within eight feet of me, eight feet. . . ." Eustace paused again, leaning heavily across the chair.

"He got the bullet, ye mean!" Simon choked. "Oh, ye miserable waster. What the mischief took ye into Echo Gully? Isn't there cover and game enough in your own land?"

Simon stooped over, but did not touch, the bent figure. "Pull yourself together, and don't whine like that, Eustace," he said in a pitifully changed voice. "Who saw ye do it?"

"No one. I didn't know until I burrowed through the scrub and found him. Beastly things grow as high as trees down there, but they didn't stop the bullet!"

"Where's the rifle ye—ye shot him with?"

"In the river. It was no use bringing it here."

Simon sat in his chair, and his jaw hung heavily. Personally he cared not a straw for Josephs; such human parasites were better out of the way, he argued. He had seen too much of life and death in the wilds of Queensland to feel the slightest

stab of remorse or regret at the accident. Similar happenings were of daily occurrence in the bush. A horse bolted, and a man's neck was broken, trees fell and crushed the life out of a timber-getter. Flood and fire accounted for scores. And there was always the weekly gun fatality. His one thought was to keep the affair quiet, and allow the police to attach their own verdict to the incident.

Eustace had committed his initial blunder in remaining away from the homestead until after nightfall. His absence may already have been commented upon by some of the station hands. If he were honest and surrendered his son to the authorities little or nothing would be gained by his action. He knew enough of Queensland police methods, in the past, to feel certain that a Crown prosecutor would put his finger on the money transaction which had passed between Josephs and Eustace. Any whipster of an attorney could twist the case, as it stood, into one of premeditated murder. Between his son and the deceased there had existed sufficient cause for a quarrel. The repayment of the seven hundred pounds, only the day before—money lent at usurious rates—would lend colour to any vile theory suggested by a prosecuting counsel. In Queensland men had been hanged on evidence far less convincing.

Simon looked at his son sharply. "Eustace, was there any ill will between you and that fellow?" he asked, bluntly.

Eustace flinched, straightened his bent shoulders on the instant. "If I despised Josephs it was on

account of his trade. It was the bush parasites that caused his death . . . those suckers that exist by strangling young trees and shrubs. Funny when you come to think of it," he added, with a peculiar laugh. "The forest drew his blood as he drew blood out of the forest workers and husbandmen."

"How were ye carrying the rifle, Eustace?"

"The usual way," was the weary rejoinder. "Even an experienced sportsman cannot always dodge the fingers of the accursed lawyer vines. The rifle, as I remember, seemed to be pointing upward."

"And the devil's job ye made of it," cried Simon passionately. "The cheque I gave to Josephs will set the police at us. I've lost cattle," he went on, with a touch of desperation in his voice; "I've been half ruined with fires and floods, but this dead jape of a money-lender bids fair to put a rope round both our necks."

"Be moderate with your rope, pater." Eustace dropped into a chair resignedly. "Mine's the neck, mine only. I'll report the affair at Engandine to-night. I'll tell the plain truth."

"Plain Gehenna," snapped Simon, wriggling in his chair. "Ye'll remain dumb as the man ye shot. If I had the shadow of a doubt concerning your innocence, I'd lock ye in the stable till the police dragged ye out. An ass and a spendthrift ye may be, but I'll not believe ye drew a gun on the Jew."

"We must bring him from that gully. The

country is overrun with dingoes. Neither Jew nor Moslem deserve that fate."

"I'll go out with McNeil and fetch him in. A guest must be looked after in this part of the world when he goes astray. There'll be nothing suspicious in our finding him."

Hereat Eustace described minutely the locality of the accident. Simon, after a nip of brandy to steady his nerves, prepared to call out McNeil.

"I'm not sure about the part ye should play," he said to the bowed figure in the chair. "I leave it to your judgment. Stay indoors; go to bed if you will, but for Heaven's sake don't fool with the whisky decanter. One more mistake," he added, warningly, "and it will take a cleverer head than mine to save your neck."

Simon halted in the doorway; then drew back at the sound of footsteps on the gravel outside. McNeil, the overseer, came forward, a telegram in his hand. He appeared tired and overworked; his voice had a grumbling intonation as he handed the envelope to Simon.

"A wire for Mr. Josephs. The messenger's waiting for a reply in the shed."

Simon thrust the telegram in the letter-rack and addressed the overseer in his usual rasping tones. "Mr. Josephs is not here. He left early this morning. D'ye know anything of his whereabouts, McNeil?"

The old stockbreeder glanced searchingly at the overseer. "Ye've no idea where he may have gone since the morning?"

McNeil responded like one who had spent a wild and hurried day on the wings of a stampeded cattle herd. "My business is not with your guests, Mr. Fitzallan," he said, pointedly. "I've been eighteen hours in the saddle, and without disrespect to yourself, sir, I may say that there isn't a man in your employ who cares a brass button for Josephs' comings and goings. It's hard enough to keep track of the Bellingers without scouting after these jackeroos."

Simon's approval of the overseer's words was veiled beneath an outburst of simulated wrath. "Are we a pack of savages to stand here while a visitor goes missing in the scrub! Get your horse and come with me, sir. The man may be hurt in one of the gullies."

McNeil edged away, breathing complaints, under his breath, anent certain unthinking idiots who permitted themselves to get bushed in fairly open country. After saddling his horse he joined Simon at the gate a few minutes later.

Despite his iron nerve the old stockbreeder trembled for his son's safety. McNeil, although salted in his service for half a score of years, was not to be trusted beyond the instant need. He was, therefore, compelled to act with discretion in leading the way to Echo Gully. The overseer was no fool, and was not likely to be led straightway to the fern cover without engendering a suspicion of foul play.

Therefore Simon led him by a circuitous path, knowing that McNeil would, of his own accord, make for Echo Gully, where Josephs had been seen

loitering the day before. And the impatient, fast-riding overseer did not disappoint him. Skirting the gully at the northern end he rode along the boulder-flanked track, shouting from time to time the name of the missing man.

A white owl hooted dismally from an overhanging blackbutt as they descended into the ravine-like depression. Occasionally the canopy of foliage was shaken by droves of flying foxes that broke away at their approach. The bridle track led them within fifty yards of the fern cover. Simon's lantern revealed the wet rocks overhead, the lightning-blazed eucalyptus tree mentioned by Eustace. Yet he exhibited a certain shyness in the matter of entering the cover, and contented himself in calling out the dead man's name.

McNeil, his instincts of bushcraft fully aroused, crashed into the thick down-trampled undergrowth that surrounded the fern copse. A cry that resembled a dingo yelp brought Simon to his elbow, peering under the uplifted lantern at the huddled shape lying before them. The overseer trembled violently at sight of the bullet-marked brow, while Simon's pretended surprise led him into a torrent of invective hurled against the unknown perpetrators of the crime.

The overseer was too shaken by the discovery to make reply. Very slowly he dismounted, and with Simon's help succeeded in placing the form of Josephs across his own saddle. Once out of the gully McNeil swore openly at the task which had been allotted him.

Simon led the way home, picking out the easiest paths with the craft of an old bushman. "There's no need for ye to swear, Mac, because you're called upon to do a Christian act," he said, the moment the station lights showed through the trees.

McNeil accepted the rebuke darkly, venturing no reply as he dismounted at the homestead gate, and was assisted by Simon in carrying the supine Josephs to the verandah. Several paces from the house their eyes were attracted by the flash of metal buttons near the window lights. A few seconds later a grizzled beard and shoulder straps heaved into view.

"It's Sergeant Deemer!" McNeil exclaimed. "Just in the nick of time, too," he added, with a grunt of relief.

"Damn him!" The words left Simon's lips in spite of himself. The sight of the trooper made real the tormenting thought which had been uppermost in his mind during the ride home. "Always at hand these—— minions of the Government when not wanted," he fumed. "Of all the nights in the year, of all the nights in his life. . . ."

Stifling his wrath, he thrust out his hand towards the silent trooper, and shook the long muscular fingers with pretended warmth. "You're the man we want, Deemer," he burst out. "There has been some queer little game over yonder." He indicated the dark bush-sheltered track in the direction of Echo Gully.

Without words the sergeant stepped towards McNeil, and glanced down at the quiet figure in his

arms. "A sick man?" he questioned, tersely. "Where did you find him?"

"Shot through the head, sergeant. The young fellow was a guest of mine," Simon explained, with dry lips and hardening voice. "He left here early this morning, but did not come back. McNeil and I searched, and found him doubled up in a pack of ferns away in Echo Gully. I'm thankful, anyway, that you're here, sergeant, to attest some part of the proceedings."

Sergeant Deemer felt his beard abstractedly, and refrained from comment of any kind until he had assisted McNeil in placing the body in one of the back rooms adjoining the store. An ex-army man, with a wide knowledge of the Queensland bush, Sergeant Deemer asked few questions of Simon Fitzallan; he merely suggested that the affair be kept quiet until he had notified the authorities at Engandine. His visit to Wahgunyah was due, he explained, to the recent raid on Simon's paddocks, and the news which had come to hand concerning the return of the missing blood horse Lochiel.

Simon expressed his unwillingness to discuss the thefts of stock in view of the tragedy which had just occurred. Time enough to deal with ordinary cattle thieves when the shooting of Barney Josephs was cleared up. Hereat Simon ordered one of his servants to bring refreshments for Sergeant Deemer and McNeil. A decanter of whisky was placed on the dining-room table, together with some cold meat and poultry.

McNeil fell to with gusto, sampling the whisky

again and again, as though to lift the melancholy which had settled on his mind since the recovery of Josephs in the fern cover. Sergeant Deemer refused with studied politeness to partake of the slightest hospitality. He was in a hurry to be gone, he said. The serious turn of events prohibited anything but the severest formalities in the present instance.

"I paid a visit to your office, Mr. Fitzallan, thinking to find you there." He spoke on the verandah steps, his grim, sun-tanned features silhouetted in the electric light.

Simon leaned forward from the doorway, his face was perfectly calm. "My son Eustace was there when I left, sergeant. He came home from Oxford awhile back stuffed with learning and the traditions of his college."

Silence followed for a period that ached like eternity. The old stockbreeder remained in the doorway and listened to the clink of the trooper's bridle chain.

"I thought Mr. Eustace looked rather queer, if I may say so." Sergeant Deemer half turned with his foot in the stirrup, his left hand gripping his horse's mane. "Seemed a bit scared about something. If I hadn't known better I should have thought he'd been drinking." He was in the saddle now, and his spirited animal pawed impatiently in the path.

"I'll not say that he wasn't," Simon answered without a tremor. "University life hasn't improved him in that respect, sergeant. Still, he's

not too old to drop the habit. There'll be no time here for indulgences once he's in harness."

The trooper listened and nodded, looked sharply at the earnest face of the old stockbreeder, coughed once or twice in a non-committal way, and rode off into the night.

Simon had followed him a little way towards the gate; he returned slowly to the house and found the overseer staring into the office, his eyes agleam with curiosity and surprise. The lights still burned inside; nothing had altered since he had left. It was Eustace that attracted him. Half lying across the table, his arms stretched out, his loud sobs seemed to rend and shake him.

McNeil pointed owlshly, and was about to speak when Simon brushed him aside. "Go to your bed, man. What is there to gape at?" he demanded.

"I beg your pardon," stammered the overseer. "I thought he was ill or something."

"Man, you've no feelings in these little matters," Simon retorted harshly. "It is no discredit to my son that he should exhibit a little foolish emotion at the loss of his friend!"

McNeil retreated to his quarters aggravated and bewildered at the sudden turn of events. Halting at the hut door he was surprised to discover Simon at his elbow. The old stockbreeder spoke in a subdued tone.

"The boy saw what ye had across your saddle, Mac. It took him by surprise, no doubt. Josephs

and he were better friends than I thought. Good-night, McNeil."

"Good-night, Mr. Fitzallan !"

Simon returned to the office and shook his son's stooping shoulder half fiercely. "Come, come, Eustace, brace yourself. Hold up your head. It's too late in the day to be making admissions about gun accidents and the like. Go to bed and sleep till you're called. To-morrow you'll be glad ye held your tongue."

CHAPTER IX

ALTHOUGH the bush police of Australia have proved themselves inefficient, at times, in dealing with countless minor crimes committed in the remote interior, they are, as a body, a diligent and far-seeing class of men. Often they are called upon to investigate problems, social and criminal, which have no parallel in other civilised countries.

Sergeant Deemer was regarded by his superior officers as an extremely cautious bushman, whose skill, as a tracker, placed him in the front rank wherever the business of man-hunting was in progress. He returned from Simon's house to the lock-up at Engandine, his mind perfectly free from any theory or suspicion in connection with the shooting of Barney Josephs.

At the inquest next day, held at Wahgunyah station, a verdict of death caused by some person or persons unknown was recorded. Eustace was not present. Simon had sent him to an outlying paddock in charge of a small mob of Herefords. He was accompanied by a young boundary rider named Gaskill. So long as his son maintained a discreet silence, there seemed little fear of the police probing the actual cause of Josephs' death. Within a month the affair would be forgotten.

At the termination of the inquest, Simon had written a brief note of sympathy to Josephs' parents, and received the following day a letter from the young man's father, which stated that the cheque for seven hundred pounds had been received only a few hours previously. The letter was full of a father's anguish and grief at the loss of his son, and for some time the old stockbreeder was moved beyond himself at the sudden despair and misery which had followed Eustace's careless handling of a loaded rifle.

As the morning wore on a thought grew in Simon's mind that left him hot and cold by turns. He had not counted on the aftermath of the brief inquest, the sudden police activity that would eventuate in the vicinity of Echo Gully. It was the black trackers he feared now, those unerring sleuths of the bush, from whose craft and intuitions there was no escape. Once on a scent they followed and pieced together the scrappiest earth-signs and impressions in the soil, which often led to unexpected developments.

Simon was well versed in the ways of the native police trackers. If the Government dispatched one or more of them to the scene of the shooting accident, they would sooner or later implicate Eustace in the affair. His tracks would be everywhere visible in the locality; and once they were convinced of his presence in the gully awkward questions might arise that would require a lot of explaining.

Simon strolled leisurely in the direction of the

men's quarters, where McNeil was seated on the paddock rail watching the gyrations of an untamable buckjumper. For a little while Simon viewed the colt's frantic endeavours to unseat its rider, then, turning to the overseer, addressed him in a confidential tone.

"I've been thinking of the good herbage we saw in Echo Gully last night, Mac. It's a year or more since I passed through the place. There seems to be a lot of barley grass along the fern covers."

McNeil clambered down from the paddock rail and became suddenly attentive. "Echo Gully is beyond our boundary," he answered. "Quite a mile from our northern line. I noticed a lot of good feed down there. Pity it isn't ours."

"I hold grazing rights over and beyond it," Simon declared. "I'll show them to ye."

The overseer kicked up the earth at his feet, and then his eye followed a bare patch of country that lay about a mile to the west. "If I'd known it before we might have run that big mob of starvers—the Tenterfield lot—into it last week," he said, thoughtfully.

"Ye know it now," Simon hinted, with a swift, side glance. "Maybe," he paused, holding the point of his sandy beard between thumb and finger, "'twould not be too late to run them in at once. What d'ye think?"

The overseer winced; his toe kicked the earth, while a deep pucker lined his brow. "Bit sudden, eh?" he asked, without looking up.

"Sudden! What are ye talking about?"

Simon grew crisp on the instant. He faced his man, but discovered that the eyes would not meet his. "I'll be glad, Mac, if you'll make your statements clear," he insisted.

"I mean that it would look queer to go driving a mob of cattle over that place, Mr. Fitzallan. I admit there's good grass in the holes, but I don't cotton to the notion of feeding bulls on the spot where a man was murdered only yesterday. It's unbusinesslike of me to say so, but I can't help my feelings, sir."

McNeil pocketed his hands with an air of judicial cunning, and was about to return to his seat on the rail. Simon's voice drew him to the half-turn.

"I may tell ye honestly, Mac, that it does not strike me that way. I forgot that you were a Scot," he added, pensively. "Most of ye are as superstitious as old housewives. I take it that none of the Australian lads in my employ would hold similar objections."

The overseer's stiffness of manner evaporated by degrees. Something in Simon's tone struck him as unusual. McNeil was a middle-aged man with a large family of half-grown daughters in Brisbane; and he was not anxious to join the ranks of unemployed station managers there—a circumstance likely to eventuate the moment he attempted to thwart his employer's wishes. His attitude of conscientious indifference became one of immediate self-abasement.

"I fancied you mightn't like the idea yourself,

Mr. Fitzallan." Then, remembering Simon's own nationality, he added with vigour, "A Scot I am, sir, and I cannot help my prejudices."

"You have a long tongue this hot morning, Mac. Want of sleep has made your head light. Come along ; I'll talk as we go."

Simon passed from the yard followed by the obsequious McNeil. Once in the open, the old stockbreeder began his instructions.

"You'll send that mob of starvers through Echo Gully this morning, Mac. Are ye listening ?"

"Go on, Mr. Fitzallan."

"Drive them well into the gully. Try the track we took last night ; there's grass up to your knees. Ye may camp them there, with a couple of men, for a day or two. There's no profit in allowing these starvers to eat up our own paddocks while good grass is rotting in Echo Gully. Where's the sense, man ?"

An hour later the overseer, accompanied by two stockmen, followed lazily on the wings of an outspreading cattle mob as they moved hungrily towards the rich grassy slopes of Echo Gully. A great circle of dust blew around them, dust that bit on the palate and caused the men's voices to crack and grow hoarse.

"Some bosses are gluttons for grass !" one of the riders shouted to his companions. "They'd feed a circus over their father's grave."

"Ya'a's," was the drawled out reply. "Cemeteries are good places for grass." The pistol-like banging of a stockwhip followed the remark.

"Ya'a's. Know a drover in Monaro who rushed his sheep through a church-gate when the sexton wasn't lookin'. Grass! My oath, it grows in them places all right."

The sun flamed overhead from a sky of steely blue. Here and there the ragged brigalows stood out in clear silhouette where the dwarf scrub and cotton bush fretted the skyline. A band of crows ca'ad in the wake of the fast-travelling mob. The country immediately adjacent to Wahgunyah had been eaten bare of grass and herbage by the vast overlanding herds that moved north from the cold bare tablelands of New South Wales.

At the head of Echo Gully the overseer signalled the drovers to hurry the mob at a fast gait into the grassy pastures below. Before the dogs had voiced the order a trooper rode from the shadow of the ravine holding up his right hand.

"You must keep those cows out of this gully," he commanded. "They'll interfere with our work." His carbine rested across his saddle front, and his manner smacked of authority—and a quick temper.

McNeil paled slightly at the unexpected interruption, but deemed it advisable to give a second order to the waiting drovers. "Our grazing rights extend all over this country," he said, blandly. "We've got to feed our stock."

"They're Fitzallan's cattle, eh?" The trooper ambled his horse closer in and scrutinised the overseer. "Were you instructed to drive them into Echo Gully?" he asked.

"Not exactly; we're merely entitled to feed famishing stock wherever we hold grazing rights, that's all."

"Sorry, but you must keep them out until further orders. There's a Government officer at work in the gully. You had better not drive your hoofs on top of him. It cuts up the ground, and prevents our trackers from working," he added, significantly.

Without waiting for the overseer's reply, the trooper cantered his horse to the head of the ravine, where he remained with his carbine resting across his saddle front.

McNeil stifled an oath as he flung out an order to wheel the mob homeward. The dogs leaped to their work, while the two drovers swore at the sudden turn of events, using their whips with brutal cunning whenever a straggler broke back from the flanks of the grass-hungry squadron.

The overseer was no fool. It was clear to him that he had been sent out to cut up the ground inside the gully and to efface by means of a hundred cattle hoofs any tell-tale impression that might assist the police in solving the mystery of Josephs' death.

With his head lowered in thought, the overseer rode homeward on the heels of the slow-moving mob.

Down in the fern covers of Echo Gully Sergeant Deemer pursued his investigations in silence and without haste. Trooper Hannan followed him from point to point, silent and self-contained, speaking only when addressed, knowing from experience

that his senior officer would promptly resent any suggestion or advice touching the case in hand.

From the beginning Sergeant Deemer desired whatever kudos and glory might result from a speedy solution of the shooting mystery. For twenty years he had laboured unflinchingly to gain his chance, and during his twenty years' service he had been guilty of scarcely a single error of judgment. He had compelled Trooper Hannan's presence in the gully with the object of teaching that self-contained young man a lesson in bush-craft and black-tracking.

Sergeant Deemer was without the slightest imagination; indeed, he always opposed what he termed fanciful speculations on the part of his subordinates. Like a native tracker, he passed from sign to sign unhampered of that inductive reasoning which permeates the world's best detective work.

Accustomed to the business in hand, he scrutinised with the eye of a blackfellow the dumb witness of yesterday's tragedy. And his trained vision saw evidences in upturned stones, speech in certain footmarks visible in the deep black soil of the gully.

For some time he remained on all-fours near the spot where Eustace had crouched in his white-lipped despair. McNeil's horse-tracks were visible at one point of the fern cover; he detected Simon's a little farther on. But the square-toed footmarks indented everywhere around a huge boulder, overlooking the fern cover, interested him vastly. That they did not belong to Simon or the overseer he felt

positive ; neither were they the kind likely to have been made by the deceased man Josephs.

Beyond the fern cover they again appeared very faintly in the root-covered earth, but plainer and sharper on the softer ground at the gully entrance. Here they trailed off in the direction of the river.

Trooper Hannan followed with the horses, and once or twice during the sergeant's laborious investigations he appeared strangely affected. There were moments when speech threatened to burst from him, and was only checked by Sergeant Deemer's frosty glances in his direction.

Out in the open, however, the old sergeant ventured to relieve his mind. "Something fishy about the whole affair," he explained tersely. "Simon Fitzallan has been withholding valuable information, I fear. I've an idea, though, that the river bed will supply the deficiency."

Signalling the trooper, stationed at the head of the gully, to remain at his post, he followed the tracks in an undeviating line to the river bank. Hannan accompanied him, riding a little in his rear, until the mud-coloured stream brought them to a halt. Here the square-toed footprints described a half-circle near a clump of silky oaks, and then turned sharply in the direction of Wahgunyah station.

Sergeant Deemer dismounted, and without a word to his companion divested himself of his uniform, and waded carefully into the slow-moving current. With the water about his arms he dived suddenly, and reappeared almost in midstream.

Resting a little, to take breath, he again plunged below, to a point directly opposite where the foot-prints had halted on the bank.

To the trooper waiting in the shade of the silky oaks it seemed ages before the grizzled head and beard showed on the surface, this time holding a dripping, mud-coated rifle in his hand.

"The old trick," panted the sergeant, the moment the bank was reached. "Shoot a man and hide the gun. A game that might be worth a hill of beans in any country but Australia."

Dressing leisurely, he proceeded to examine the mud-covered rifle, which proved to be a beautifully embossed weapon that bore the impress of a well-known English firm of gunmakers. Sergeant Deemer estimated its value at thirty guineas, a sum that no ordinary bushman could afford to spend on a rifle.

Wiping the river stains from it carefully, the sergeant speedily regained the saddle. "We might as well call at Fitzallan's place on our way to Engandine," he said to Trooper Hannan. "It's much better than following the ordinary road."

Hannan was about to volunteer an answer, but changed his mind in the shift of an eye. The track to Wahgunyah station led through some cotton bush, where they encountered a small tribe of blacks camped under a thickly timbered slope. Both officers threw several pieces of tobacco among the expectant myalls as they rode by. About a mile from Wahgunyah a couple of horsemen became visible through the scattered brigalows.

They were evidently bound for the station, and as they drew nearer Sergeant Deemer shortened rein instinctively.

"It's young Fitzallan!" he declared. "He must have been out with the cattle early this morning."

Trooper Hannan seemed to be holding his breath; his lips tightened ominously. Turning into the home track, Eustace caught sight of the two officers. Their proximity affected him strangely. The blood vanished from his face, leaving it an ashen grey.

"Square-toed boots he's wearing," the sergeant muttered under his breath, his swift eyes measuring his man hip and foot, as though life and death hung on his scrutiny.

"You've had a hot morning for your ride, Mr. Fitzallan," he began, pleasantly.

"Some men's punishment is measured by heat and cold," was Eustace's unexpected reply. Something in the sergeant's waiting attitude rang upon his overstrained senses. The deadly nausea which had first overcome him gave way to a sudden nervous exhilaration, a feeling of gladness that the climax of the miserable accident had arrived at last. The sergeant's manner was as clear to him as printed words, although speech had fallen dead between them.

Deemer was now certain of his man; his professional instincts were agog at the swift way he had solved a very intricate murder case—it could be nothing less, he thought. Yet, as he glanced at

the face of the unhappy young man, he was moved to a sense of pity and restraint.

But only for a moment. Duty and the needs of promotion urged him a step nearer his chief business.

"I'll ride with you to Wahgunyah, Mr. Eustace," he said, with an official cough at the end of the words. "I have something here that belongs to you or your father."

The rifle slipped from the folds of his cape, and Eustace saw it in a flash. All the buoyancy of gesture and speech died within him. An unspeakable weariness clouded his eye and brain.

It was not the first time that Sergeant Deemer had brought his quarry to the lock-up without a warrant. In the present instance he had refrained from making any specific charge, knowing that Eustace would accompany him unquestioningly. The trooper rode beside him, while the station hand kept well ahead. At one time Eustace seemed about to break into a passionate fit of explanation, but the next moment saw him self-restrained, pondering a little sullenly over his ignominious position. A slip of the hand, followed by an error of judgment, had placed him in the grip of the law. The rifle which had caused Josephs' death would in all probability bring him within the shadow of the scaffold. Three people at least could swear to having seen it in his possession on the morning of the tragedy.

He wondered, as he rode in the blaze of the hot noon, why the sergeant had so mercifully refrained

from uttering the obnoxious formula which usually accompanies an arrest. Trooper Hannan whistled plaintively once or twice, sighed, and smoothed his horse's neck as he ambled beside Eustace.

At the edge of the cotton bush Eustace shifted in his saddle uneasily, and addressed the grey-haired officer at his elbow.

"You have been very good to keep back what is in your mind," he said, quietly. "Perhaps we might save time and useless formalities if we rode straight to Engandine."

"I will do anything you wish, Mr. Fitzallan. I had a notion you'd like, maybe, to——" He paused, as though in doubt of the proper words to convey his meaning.

"To see my father." Eustace finished the sentence for him. "No," he added, quickly. "I shall see him soon enough."

The boundary rider, Gaskill, who accompanied Eustace in the morning, returned to the station to inform Simon of what had occurred. He had been an attentive listener during the short interview, and his alert mind grasped, at the outset, the full importance of the proceedings. Eustace looked back at the homestead among the pines, as they skirted the western boundary. A familiar shape was standing on the verandah—a lean, sunburnt figure that stared with flashing eyes in their direction.

Sergeant Deemer made the pace a little smarter immediately the open country was reached. He chatted lightly from time to time with his prisoner; made passing reference to the crops and the bad

state of the roads, but never once did the name of Josephs escape him.

The lean figure standing on the homestead verandah watched them disappear beyond the dim grey bush that shut out the Engandine valley from his sight. The glitter of their accoutrements struck sharply on his vision. Through his binoculars he made out the forms of Deemer and Trooper Hannan. The figure riding between them was his son.

CHAPTER X

"I MAY inform you at the outset, Mr. Fitzallan, that there is only a remote possibility of saving your son. The fact that the affair, as you assure me, was the result of an accident, does not, unfortunately, coincide with the evidence of Sergeant Deemer. Of course, I ought not to speak like this. But it is better to be forewarned. A year ago, I should have experienced little difficulty in explaining the facts to an intelligent jury. To-day, however, things are different. The Mount Dennis case has soured the people's minds. And to-day we have the bulk of the Australian Press against us."

"I do not understand, Sir Julian, why the Press should be against us," came from the white-lipped Simon.

"Mr. Fitzallan, if Eustace had been the son of a poor man the case would have presented fewer difficulties. You are a cattle king, and according to the democratic Press, a man of vast wealth and estates. The coming trial is going to fix the attention of the whole continent. Already one or two of the larrikin newspaper organs are screaming about the usurpation of the people's rights, together with the squaring of juries in the interests of wealthy

criminals. These cries are being raised, at the present moment, with a view to your son's conviction.

"Last year, as you remember," continued Sir Julian, "five young men belonging to the poorer classes were hanged at Darlinghurst gaol for an offence that merited only a short term of imprisonment. The presiding judge was no doubt influenced by class interest, and the violent wave of hysteria which had its beginnings in the columns of the daily Press. Such egregious miscarriages of justice may appear to you, at first, as irrelevant, and in no way connected with your son's case. Let me assure you, Mr. Fitzallan, as one experienced in the ways of juries and the Australian Press, that seven men out of ten in this country are smarting under what is termed an era of squatter-made law, a law that has never been known to convict the son of a rich man."

After his son's examination at the Engandine court-house, the presiding justice of the peace, acting on the strong evidence of Sergeant Deemer, had committed Eustace for trial on a charge of shooting one Barney Josephs, financier and general commission agent.

Simon had journeyed to Brisbane, where Eustace had been conveyed in order to await his trial. Here the services of Sir Julian Keen, Q.C., had been retained on his son's behalf. Although a bluff and outspoken member of the Colonial Bar, Sir Julian was recognised as one of the most brilliant advocates of his time. A man of savage ironies, and the

owner of a caustic wit, he was a proved fighter when the life of a client trembled in the balance.

Sergeant Deemer had thrown himself into the case with unusual determination ; not that he bore ill-will against the cattle king's son, but from the fact that his vanity had been stirred by the appearance of scores of Press notices. In one prominent paper he had been referred to as the brainiest officer in the Queensland police force, one who had not shrunk from bringing within the reach of justice the son of a man whose wealth and influence in the Engandine district might have made detection of the crime impossible. The question that now remained was whether it was possible, in a colonial court of justice, to convict the son of a rich squatter on a capital charge.

During those still hot days that preceded the trial Simon felt that the forces of a continent were arrayed against him. One or two of the more irresponsible newspapers caricatured him in various unprepossessing attitudes. The story of his early beginnings was printed with ferocious embellishments, showing how, at various periods, he had appropriated vast areas of the people's land. His career as a persecutor of the weak and struggling selector was treated with characteristic mendacity.

Sir Julian Keen had sounded a terrible warning. There was no question of right or wrong in the case. It was the first time almost in the history of the colony that the son of a squatter had been brought to the bar of justice. A feeling of expectation ran from the city slums to the remotest out-back settle-

ment. Would they dare acquit a man who, according to the most reliable information, had been caught almost red-handed, while five boys of the larrikin class had been hanged for a slight offence without even a recommendation to mercy?

Only by the grace of the chief commissioner of police did Simon himself escape arrest. At the inquiry, Sergeant Deemer had stressed the cattle-driving incident, how he had been compelled to prevent, almost by force, the destruction of valuable clues which had led ultimately to the accused's arrest. Any one acquainted with cattle would understand that the presence of a roaming mob of bullocks in the vicinity of Echo Gully would destroy all evidence of young Fitzallan's guilt.

The station overseer, McNeil, and his assistant stockrider had been summoned to give evidence. It had been urged that the cattle-driving incident, occurring as it did immediately after the tragedy, was the most ominous proceeding in connection with the affair.

Mr. Josephs, senior, had come forward to demand a strict inquiry into the cause of his son's death. Like most of his class, he was moved between grief and a desire for swift vengeance when the news of Eustace's arrest was made known. Many wealthy relatives in the city rallied to his assistance, urging him to press remorselessly against the slayer of his offspring. A few declared that Eustace had been incited to the deed, during a fit of anger, after having paid the £700 to young Josephs.

A wave of fear swept over Simon Fitzallan on the

eve of the trial—fear of the sinister crowds which hung about the court-house, the vulture-like men who interrogated him at every opportunity, thrusting advice upon him, following him from street to street, demanding sums of money under threats of violence and exposure.

He saw his son for a brief period each morning, and the man who had fought drought and fire for thirty years came near breaking down at each visit to the bleak, forbidding gaol, where the armed warders patrolled the turreted walls and yards. Some shred of hope lay in the fact that the judge before whom Eustace was to appear had been known to favour the cause of the squatter and pastoralist who came within his jurisdiction.

Simon scouted a suggestion, made to him by his counsel, that an effort might be made to prove Eustace an irresponsible degenerate. Sympathy would be created if it were thought that he was the victim of mental hallucinations.

After the first shock of his arrest Eustace accepted the situation with becoming philosophy. The combined insults of the Press could not make him feel a criminal at heart. His father suffered most. The silent anguish that goes with stormy, fibrous natures, was visible in his eyes. Within an incredibly short period he had become a haggard ruin of his former self, wandering the streets by night, principally in the vicinity of the gaol, like one unable to find rest from bodily and mental torment.

Simon knew instinctively that the police were straining nerve and brain to discover some flaw

in his son's past—something that would prove in him a predisposition to criminality and vice. The old stockbreeder had always been reluctant to spy into his son's life while at Oxford. Things had happened, he felt certain, but nothing that would lend colour to any theory of criminality the police might bring forward.

Returning to his hotel, one night, after beating the streets in his futile attempts to quieten his mind, Simon observed a girlish figure waiting in the portico. Entering, he was accosted by an hotel porter, who informed him, in a whisper, that the lady had been awaiting his return since eight o'clock. Simon took her card from the tray and scanned it absently. For one moment his eye was arrested by the firm white throat, the grey eyes that seemed so full of light and pity. The old stockbreeder trembled as her gloved hand sought his impulsively. Then he stared again at the ivory card, which bore the name Cynthia Fortescue.

"I was told that I should find you here, Mr. Fitzallan." Her voice was rich and soft, intoned with English sweetness that somehow eased the fretting strain of his overwrought nerves. "I arrived in Brisbane to-day," she said, simply. "Perhaps Eustace told you of my coming?"

"He did not," Simon answered, thoughtfully, "or I should not have allowed you to wait here for me. Perhaps"—he eyed her shrewdly, but not unkindly—"perhaps you will tell me your business with my son."

"I am not here on business." She paused, as

though afraid of this nervous, sun-shrivelled little man. "I left England because——"

"Go on," he said, reassuringly. "I am interested in all Eustace's English friends."

"Where is he?" was her first question. "May I see him now?"

"No," answered Simon, deliberately. A feeling of tense curiosity was upon him now. "Are ye Eustace's sweetheart?" he asked at last. "Did ye come out from England alone?"

"Yes. I was to have come with Stacy, only he thought it better that I should wait until, until——"

"The old man had been smoothed over, eh?"

For the life of him Simon could not summon up indignation or surprise at her little confession. She was the type of woman that every inexperienced boy falls in love with. The soft roses in her cheeks, the pretty milk-white skin, so different from the tawny-hued Queensland women he met by the score every day. It was one of those weary, world-old stories that scarcely needed explaining to Simon Fitzallan. And he was too soul-sick for anger, too wrapped in the grim fate of his son to brood upon trifles. What mattered if he had engaged himself to a hundred women—if the hangman claimed him in the end?

She sat gracefully on the hotel lounge, near the entrance, where the air fans pulsed and whirred coolly. She appeared fatigued after the heat of the day, very helpless, and very much alone, he thought. For the first time in his life he felt his utter inability

to deal with the situation as it presented itself. He could not tell her outright that Eustace was awaiting his trial on a charge of murder. . . . A little later, perhaps, when things were looking better. So. . . .

He sat beside her on the lounge and asked her many questions, listening to her story with eyes half closed and lips tightly drawn while she spoke of her first meeting with Eustace at Oxford. Her father was a retired Army captain, with nothing but his half-pay to support his declining years. It was the story of an Oxford family's struggle against persistent misfortune, together with the bitter knowledge that their slender income was in part absorbed by the bibulous half-pay captain at the beginning of each quarter. Eustace had met Cynthia accidentally at the house of a college chum. Later on he had encountered the bibulous parent at one of the college cricket matches, and had been cordially invited to spend the evening at the Fortescues' house.

There had been boating parties—at Eustace's expense—whereat the half-pay captain drank much whisky, and borrowed large and small sums of money from his agreeable young Australian friend. In such moments Captain Fortescue usually declared that Eustace was his honoured guest, and that he intended returning with him to Australia to begin life afresh as a gentleman rancher. He insisted, further, that nothing would sweeten his life so much as a lengthy sojourn on one of the numerous cattle stations belonging to his wealthy young friend.

During his second year at Oxford Eustace had become engaged to the daughter of the half-pay captain. His sudden return to Australia had merely quickened their affections, Cynthia explained. Eustace had sent her a cheque from Colombo (one of Josephs', Simon fancied), and she had lost not a moment in joining her fiancé.

The story was unfolded to Simon very innocently, very sweetly, as only an actress or a simple-minded girl could have handled it without exposing herself to suspicion and contempt. A month before the old stockbreeder would have bundled her bag and baggage aboard the first homeward-bound steamer, despite her pretty dimples and English manners.

But to-night he felt like one cut off from human kind with a hostile Press and public clamouring for his son's life. The coming of this English girl to claim her fiancé was a minor tragedy which could be soothed, no doubt, by the application of a cheque from his bankers. Her coming or going meant little or nothing.

Rising from the lounge, beside her, he paced the hall with head slightly bent while she regarded him in innocent wonderment. Half a dozen turns up and down the hall decided Simon. Halting opposite her, he tried to clear the hoarseness of his voice before speaking.

"Where is your baggage, Miss Fortescue?" he asked. "And where do ye intend to stay until Eustace comes along?"

"I can hardly tell you," she answered. "When papa cashed Eustace's cheque to buy my passage

ticket, he left me very little money to cover hotel expenses at this end. He said everything would be all right once I reached Brisbane. Poor papa is coming at the end of the year to join me."

"The devil take him!" muttered Simon, under his breath. "This country doesn't want half-pay captains." Then, in a voice that was without heat or passion, he said: "It would be advisable for you to stay here to-night. To-morrow I will arrange for you to go to Wahgunyah. Brisbane is no place for simple-minded young ladies. I'm hoping that Eustace will be with us in a few days," he added, fervently.

"Has he gone away—far?" she asked, a little tremulously. "Is he ill?"

Simon quieted her rising anxiety. He told her briefly that Eustace was engaged in a business operation that would necessitate his absence for some time; and, after instructing the hotel manager to attend to her needs and secure her luggage, he retired to his room to make fresh plans for the morrow. It appeared that the captain of the ship had advised Miss Fortescue to call upon Simon's business agents in the city, where she had been given his hotel address.

In the still hot hours of midnight the tragedy of her coming loomed larger, until he almost cursed his son's unfathomable habits and impulses. Here again was another of Fate's ironies for him to digest, another of Eustace's padlocked mysteries revealed!

Rising from his couch, he sat near his open window gasping for air. A heat wave had enveloped the

city, making sleep wellnigh impossible. From the distant river came the mournful hooting of a drogher, followed by the deeper trumpeting of an inward-bound vessel. His thoughts went out to his son lying inside a stifling gaol, where the armed warders patrolled the turreted walls and yards.

From his open window he could discern clearly the white quadrangle, the moving shadows of the warders as they tramped between the conning houses at each corner of the prison walls. He did not sleep that night, and the hotel porter watched him as the day broke, noiselessly pacing the verandah, halting at times to glance in the direction of the gaol.

After breakfast he wired to his housekeeper at Wahgunyah to prepare a room for Miss Cynthia Fortescue. He also wrote to Mr. Mason asking him to meet her at Engandine station, and to prevent, as far as possible, any mention of his son's grievous predicament reaching her.

At ten o'clock he drove with Miss Fortescue to the railway station, where he secured for her a comfortable compartment in an outgoing train. A half-sovereign handed discreetly to the guard made it doubly certain that no one would intrude upon her privacy during the journey to Engandine.

She appeared very sweet and free from anxiety as she sat back among the cushions. Even the tropic warmth of the night had not interfered with her healthy sleep. "I will bring Eustace back with me," Simon said as the train moved from the platform. "Good-bye!"

She waved her hand from the window, and Simon turned, with a sick, frost feeling, in the direction of the court-house. He felt the city moving about him as though it were some huge animal seeking to devour him. Want of sleep had told on his iron nerves. A month ago he could have remained awake indefinitely and felt none the worse. His eyes had grown yellow, his tough, sun-blackened hand shook when he took his seat beside the one occupied by his counsel.

The court was crowded to its limit. Several members of the Legislative Assembly occupied prominent positions, squatters and pressmen from all parts of the country strove to find a place within. Very few people were interested personally in Barney Josephs—a principle of law was at stake, a question which affected the fundamentals of citizenship, of equality and justice.

The opening of the case was fraught with surprises of cunningly arranged sequences of testimony linked together by an astute police administration bent on securing a verdict of wilful murder against the accused.

Eustace Fitzallan sat in the railed enclosure, a constable at each elbow, pensive and apparently disinterested, and roused only at intervals to the reality of the proceedings by some startling declaration on the part of Sergeant Deemer. He noted, however, the absence of Trooper Hannan from the array of witnesses brought forward from time to time.

The cattle-driving incident was dwelt upon at

great length, the sergeant endeavouring to point out the means which had been attempted by Simon to obliterate all traces of the crime. Eustace's rifle, still bearing signs of its immersion in the river, was produced. Evidence would be forthcoming later, the sergeant stated, to prove that the weapon had been in the possession of the accused at the time of the tragedy.

Simon was subjected to a pitiless cross-examination, during which the judge was called upon to remind the Crown Prosecutor that a witness was not necessarily a person to be badgered and heckled to the point of distraction.

Nevertheless, Eustace's career at Oxford suffered at the hands of the vehement counsel. His history was traced from the day he left Australia until he returned three years later to Wahgunyah station. His home-coming was described at length, his condition of helpless inebriation at the moment of his arrival was dwelt upon with the gusto of a temperance orator. What were the after-effects of that brain-paralysing debauch? the counsel demanded. A weakening of the whole mental fabric, which permitted certain criminal traits, latent in the accused, to regain their ascendancy. That there existed a feeling of the bitterest enmity between the money-lender Josephs and Eustace Fitzallan he had not the slightest doubt. Was it not conceivable, human, in fact, that, after being bled of nearly a thousand pounds, the prisoner should harbour malice against the deceased? The jury must bear in mind this latter fact, and dispense with any

assumption of accidental death likely to be introduced by the prisoner's friends.

The Crown Prosecutor paused with elaborate self-assurance before resuming. Did the attempt to conceal the weapon in the river point to complete innocence on the prisoner's part? he continued. Surely not. Men had been shot accidentally in the bush before, but no case stood on record where there had been any attempt to conceal the fact.

Attention was drawn to certain alleged hypochondriac tendencies on the part of the prisoner, his expulsion from Magdalen College, and, above all, his intrepid cunning in attempting to cover up his tracks by means only known to the most expert bushmen.

Nothing that might convince the jury of Eustace's guilt was left unsaid. Facts were distorted; everything that had a tendency to indicate the accidental shooting of Josephs was scientifically suppressed, until even Eustace, accustomed as he was to wranglings and debates, shrank from the castigating epithets hurled at his head.

The court adjourned late, leaving Simon in a ferment of fear and doubt beside the immobile Sir Julian Keen. The vigour and ferocity of the Crown Prosecutor's attack had shaken the old cattle king to his soul depths.

Eustace had left the dock without a sign of emotion in his eyes, as he turned to nod a brief farewell to his father. Sir Julian followed Simon from the court-house. His manner was grave,

and he spoke under restraint when they gained the street.

“Come to my office early to-morrow,” he said, as they shook hands. “Sleep your best to-night, for to-morrow may be the hardest day of all.”

CHAPTER XI

WHILE Simon Fitzallan was battling for his son's life in Brisbane, David Bellinger was seriously thinking of ploughing the ten-acre paddock at the rear of the homestead. A heavy shower of rain had fallen during the night, replenishing tanks and water holes, and loading the stagnant air with the rich perfumes of gum forests and wattle boughs.

Once in the open, with his newly painted plough, David followed his sweating grass-fed horses down the red furrows, where the waiting magpies fluted within arm's reach, singing the songs that were in his own heart—those lyrics of the mind that respond to the calls of earth and sky. The magpies followed him inquisitively, as though the sight of a worm were a new experience after the endless weeks of drought and heat.

Far away in the east the scarce-risen sun floated in a sheen of tawny cloud above the low-lying cotton bush. A few steaming sheep clung together on the misty flats where the brigalows leaned and sighed in the scarce-moving air. A tall shadow seemed to leap from the cottage door the instant David swung in his plough at the furrow end, and stayed for a moment to rest his horses.

"These magpies," he said, addressing the shadow in the doorway, "always remind me of them Cafferty brothers who built the whisky still over at Blue Gum Valley."

The shadow inclined suddenly, as Martin, in his pants and singlet, slouched into the open. "What about the Caffertys?" he inquired, gruffly. "Never heard of magpies bein' used for whisky."

His bilious eye fell upon the long straight furrow and then beyond the inquisitive birds wheeling behind the plough. "What about the Caffertys?" he asked again.

David wiped his brow, hitched his waistbelt, and leaned over the plough handle. "Magpie saved Hannan's life one night. He was ridin' round the Caffertys' place, sniffin' the whisky fumes, an' ridin' in a straight line for the two boys at work over the still. He was goin' at a good pace when he spotted a magpie, perched about three feet in the air in the middle of the track. He pulled up sharp, an' found that a wire had been drawn across. Only for that mag' he'd have broken his neck. As it was, he got both lads seven years."

David continued his ploughing, singing his way from furrow to furrow, while the sun climbed into the windless vault of blue. Nearing the cottage, he again addressed the sulking Martin, with unabated good-humour.

"It's good business to be seen ploughin' when the troopers call, Marto. Gives you a sort of homely look, the look you see on the honest husbandman when the landlord pops round."

"Rats!" Martin slouched indoors to gird at his sister preparing the morning coffee. Ignoring his jibes, she passed from the kitchen and hailed her father to breakfast with a clear, musical cooey. Leaving his horses near a pile of hay, David strolled in to the morning meal, shaking the clods from his boots before entering the house.

Clarry appeared incidentally, fresh from his early plunge in the creek. His irresponsible good-humour, combined with an unfailing appetite, had long been a source of anxiety to his sister.

David watched him, across the table, venturing an occasional remark to Hetty, sitting with her back to the door.

"Clarry could lick that feller they brought up from Brisbane to eat against Bill Mullins," he said, mournfully.

"The man who was supposed to eat a cow?" Hetty inquired, innocently.

"That's the feller," admitted David. "I'd like to match him against Clarry. Before Mullins got half through with his cow Clarry would be yelling for another."

"Cow?" interjected Hetty.

"Ya'as," drawled David. "They always provide three cows at a eatin' match. The feller who polishes off cow number three is generally provided with the blue ribbon. I'm thinking of trainin' Clarry for the next eatin' match at Engandine," he added, with a paternal side glance at the boy. "So you'd better go in for exercise after breakfast. I might mention a few post-holes that

want sinkin' at the paddock end, about sixty in all."

Clarry responded unmoved, his mouth full of fresh-baked bread. "I don't mind a bit of work, dad. But don't expect me to eat more than two cows this weather. Try Martin."

Martin scowled, finished his coffee with a gulp, and loafed outside. Standing near the verandah-post, the sunlight revealed his muscle-packed shoulders and torso, while his small, close-cropped head appeared ludicrously out of drawing with the moving mass of bone and flesh beneath. He yawned from time to time, picked his teeth with a sharp splinter of wood abstractedly, but David noted that his eyes wandered incessantly to the horses in the paddock.

Hetty watched his movements with more than ordinary curiosity. Save for a hastily flung jibe, he had not exchanged words with her during the last few days. Something unexplained rankled between them, something which both evaded with terrible earnestness.

But now, with her father near, she seemed eager to put an end to the strain of forced silence which threatened to overmaster her tense-drawn nerves. Martin's back and shoulders were visible to her where she sat, the red, sun-blistered neck, the short, pointed ears that invested him with a certain diabolical composure. Fascinated by his every movement, she watched him until she could bear it no longer.

Rising from her seat, she prepared to put away

the breakfast things, then, turning from the doorway, she glanced incuriously at the newly polished carbine which hung over the mantelshelf.

"Marto went shooting last Thursday, dad. He told you, I suppose?"

A strange iridescence had come into her dark eyes; her lips were ashen.

David moved lazily in his chair, took out his pipe, and began knocking the ashes into the fireplace. "Marto makes no confidences these times, Het. There's plenty of dingo scalps in the hills for the man who can hit 'em." His glance wandered to the newly polished weapon over the mantel. "Looks like a thing that would kill at a thousand yards," he said with conviction.

"You know what he promised to do the day he cleaned the gun, dad?" Hetty's eyes still held an ominous gleam.

David rose from his chair, a match held to his pipe. "About the minister, Het. I don't think he'd hurt a minister, because they're useful for marrying people. You take Marto a bit too serious, my girl. He's laughing at you half the time."

Hetty cleared the table, placing the cups and plates on a tray before entering the kitchen. She remained half bent over the cups as if considering her father's words.

"Dad," she spoke clearly and without a falter, "he went shooting on Thursday, as far as Echo Gully."

Martin raised his head slightly, a word escaped

him that drove the stormy blood into David's cheek.

"Oh, I know how he feels!" broke from the white-lipped girl. "Look at him, dad; look!"

"Why, Het, what's wrong this mornin'? You're shakin' all over." David bent near her, soothingly. "Easy does it, my girl; easy does it."

Hetty shivered. "Ask him," she went on, pointing to her brother, "what happened at Echo Gully on Thursday morning. I must tell some one, dad, I must, I must!"

She had put aside the tray, and was sobbing on David's shoulder, and for a little while his big hands patted hers soothingly. Clarry leaned across the table-end, and gaped incredulously at the unexpected turn of affairs.

Martin made a swift movement towards the door; the veins of his neck seemed to swell in the sun-glare.

"Ask what?" he demanded, fiercely. "That blamed tongue of hers will split if she isn't watched."

"I thought he was going out to shoot wallaby when I followed him," Hetty continued, "although I was a bit scared at what he said about the minister. I followed him as far as the big boulder track, and hid myself in the ferns. I saw that young man Josephs coming from the Wahgunyah side of the gully; he came up in a line with us, and I felt certain that Martin had seen him too."

Hetty paused for a moment as if to still the

savage beatings of her heart. David's hand resting on her shoulder lent courage to her fainting resolution. She continued her story in a voice that held a touch of panic and horror.

"I watched Josephs cross to the left, and as he came towards us I saw Eustace Fitzallan break cover and slip away to the right, as if he didn't want to be seen by Josephs. He was carrying a gun, and the thing caught in the vines and went off. I looked round for Martin, and he was kneeling among the rocks below with the carbine to his shoulder smoking at the muzzle."

She paused, with a catch in her breath, and clung, terrified, to David's arm. "Smoke was coming from Martin's rifle," she sobbed, "and the terrible echoes in the gully grew louder, louder. . . . I knew what had happened. Martin had seen Eustace slip over, he had seen his rifle explode accidentally, and the devil or something made him lift his carbine and shoot Josephs."

Martin flinched; his close-knit figure seemed to bound into the room and past David. Seizing his sister by the throat, he forced her against the wall. "Your tongue," he snarled; "will nothing stop it?"

David slanted forward, caught him wrist and throat, and squeezed until the sunburnt face grew dark under the suffocating grip.

"You . . . dog! I'll hurt you. Touch your sister with those fists, eh?"

He cast Martin away in a stammering heap, and the effort neither heightened his pulse nor quickened

his breathing. Raising his daughter tenderly, he held her close.

"You must tell me . . . that story some other time, Het, some other time. It sounded a bit queer."

"Now, dad, now. I couldn't bear it longer. I can't sleep or think while it's on my conscience. It was Martin who shot Josephs! Eustace's gun was turned upwards, a foot above his head. Those terrible echoes gave Martin his chance. It was impossible to hear the second shot, Martin's shot; the echoes were pounding away all the time. Eustace never guessed the truth either; he was too scared."

Martin had risen from the floor, and stood scowling at the far end of the room. David regarded him unmoved. "Better not go from here until we've had a talk," he intimated, firmly. "You've got to make clear what Het said."

David's lion-like strength, his magnificent poise and temper, steadied Martin. Nothing was to be gained by hurling himself against his father's machine-like blows. His temper cooled rapidly, leaving him in a state of sulky watchfulness.

"I'll deal with her in my own way. I'll pay her for the horse she took back to that blighter Eustace, and that police spy Josephs she brought on my track."

"If you knew more about policemen, my lad, you'd never have mistaken that sheeny chap for one," David retorted. "He was a money-lender, and all that he ever arrested was a poor man's

earnings. I must say that the law helped him to collect it pretty often."

Hetty retreated from the room, followed by Clarry. David accompanied his dark-browed son to the end of the paddock. Here, by mutual consent, both halted and faced each other, the father serene and calm in judgment, the son sulky-eyed, but full of surrender.

Around them a half-dozen horses grazed placidly where the blue grass lay sweet and moist under the pine-sheltered bank.

"I'll own up to what Het's been squealin' about," Martin began. "Eustace nearly shot Josephs, so I made certain of it," he added, doggedly. "Killed two chickens with the one bullet."

David stared round-eyed, stripped of speech by his son's declaration. He hoped that his daughter had been mistaken in her account of the shooting affair, was inclined to the belief that Martin would throw a different light on the tragic happening. The deliberate shooting of a man in cold blood appeared unthinkable, abhorrent. . . . Hitherto the boys had openly jested at the possibility of some one being shot if they were driven into a corner or molested by the police. But in his desperate moments David had never seriously proposed the taking of human life.

"I can't remember that Eustace ever hurt you, Martin. Sure, there was never a kinder lad this side of the border. What put that hell thought into your head of makin' him feel that he'd shot his friend. What made you do it?"

"The chance showed itself, and I took it," was Martin's sullen rejoinder. "If Josephs wasn't a spy, why did he come sneakin' about our home? We didn't want to borrow his money. I saw him twice hidin' in the scrub not a hundred yards from our back window. . . . Him a money-lender!" Martin turned and spat instinctively over the rail.

This was small comfort for David. He knew nothing of the dead man Josephs; he was alive, however, to the terrible fact that his son had shot him secretly, from a peculiar coign of vantage, and was permitting another to bear the penalty.

David's face grew dark as he searched his son's half-averted eyes, eyes that now held a certain animal restlessness. It seemed to him that Martin was obsessed by the sound of the wind in the distant scrub; the sudden slamming of a gate caused him to whip round with almost simian agility.

David detected these symptoms since his daughter had spoken, and for the first time in his life a loathing of this man-slaying son came upon him. "You're thinkin' of leavin' here," he said, icily. "Where are you goin'?"

"Don't know. I'll be off to-morrow, anyway. That Het will——"

"Never mind her, an' just keep your eyes off them hawses of mine. You've got a notion, maybe, of hidin' your carcass in the hills for a month or so," went on David, "hidin' until Eustace Fitzallan

is hanged or put away for life. Is that your ticket, my lad ? ”

Martin shot an oblique glance at the big-shouldered figure before him, and breathed a trifle warily. “ I’ve been waiting to get even with the Fitzy crowd since I can remember,” he declared, with a sudden outburst of passion. “ Simon and his blasted telephones, his little habits of ringin’ up the police if a pair of bootlaces went missin’. For eight years they’ve run us off our legs whenever we’ve taken a few wild cattle from the gullies. And whose cattle are they ? ” he demanded, fiercely. “ Old Jim Sanders’, who’s been dead these ten years. Can’t you see how these squatter swine have played the game with us ? Who gave them the land ? The Fitzys have no more title to what’s inside their fences than we have. When Jim Sanders died, didn’t Simon Fitzallan round up all the stray cattle belongin’ to him before even his relations got a chance to claim their own ? When we started the same caper we found half a dozen troopers camped on our land, cleanin’ their damned carbines the mornin’ we carried mother’s coffin from the house.”

Martin drew breath as though the strain of speaking almost choked him. David’s head was bent forward, a listening blindness in his eyes, while his son’s flung-out words sank into him like bullets. There were many undeniable truths in the boy’s statements, memories that rankled, even yet, in his own forgiving heart.

Martin saw his chance, and pushed it home with some craft of speech. “ You’ve been content to

live here, dad, in a four-roomed humpy, allowin' me and Clarry to run wild, while Simon took the best from the land an' built a grand home for his son ; he sent him to college, while you, with just as good a chance, idled round and allowed us to grow up like dingoes."

" Did you ever want to go to college, Marto ? "

" I didn't say so. College wouldn't have made me any better, but it might have given Clarry a chance . . . he's different. Everybody likes him. As it is, some thief of a judge will hang him by and by for drivin' a few head of cattle across the country."

" You are runnin' from the point, Marto." David spoke like one trying to gain time. Moreover, he was unskilled in such arguments, and his son's unexpected defence disturbed him mightily. There was more in it than he cared to admit.

Martin broke in upon his thoughts with a half-grunted intimation concerning his future proceedings. " I'm goin' to have a sleep if you'll let me. I shall be in the saddle all to-morrow night. There's no sense in bein' caught hangin' about the district these times."

" You'll go when I'm ready," came from David. " If you want to sleep now there's no one to stop you. As for quittin' here altogether that's another question."

" Why ? "

David measured him foot and eye, as he had measured horses and various breeds of live stock in his day. " You'll stay here because you might be

wanted," he said, stonily. "You've just killed a man who you thought was layin' a trap to gaol you—that's all right as far as it goes, my lad. There's another side to it though, the Eustace Fitzallan side." David heaved his shoulders, while his fingers moved in and out of his big brown beard. "I couldn't let them hang him for what he's as innocent of as the unborn. No, Marto, you'll stay here an' face some of the music when it comes along."

Martin made no reply as he slouched off to his bedroom. That his father would keep watch over his movements he felt sure. Throwing himself on his camp bed he tossed fitfully for an hour or more before sleep came. About midday Clarry stole in on tip-toe, his face showing signs of the grief and horror which Hetty's disclosures had brought forth. Slowly and without sound he gathered his own belongings from the apartment, his clothes and the few books he possessed, and bore them into his father's room.

"I couldn't sleep near him again, dad," he whispered to the big shape waiting in the passage outside.

It seemed as though Martin would never wake. He slept through the afternoon, while Hetty and her brother spoke in whispers whenever they met on the verandah or in the yard. It was evident to them that he had known no rest for many nights past, living as he did in constant dread of discovery and arrest.

About midnight David entered the room, and

looked down at the sleeping face. The right hand was clenched over the brow, as though pressing back the evil shapes that stalked through his dreams.

David brooded beside the bed like one whose mind was tormented by dreams forgotten and dead. Something of Martin's neglected childhood came back to him; the days when he had been allowed to roam at large over the country, acquiring the habits of the lowest type of bushman, the love of horses and money, which leads some men to crime and penal servitude.

"Mother left us too soon, lad, ten years too soon," he muttered. "It's a hard task for a man to train two lads and a girl in a place like this!"

He thought of the wife who had succumbed, like hundreds of other bushwomen, to the heat and labour of their early life. He remembered the hut of box bark, with its earth floor and windowless walls, where Martin had been born, their daily portion of bad water, the half-cooked food, the Titanic labour of clearing the land, when the drought had turned its face to iron. Pioneering made men hard and vigorous, but it killed their wives and filled the bush townships with casteless children, starved in mind and soul—like Martin.

Clarry peeped in at the door, his hair ruffled, his eyes red and somewhat swollen. David spoke under his breath. "Better turn in, lad. No use moonin' around waitin' for things to happen."

"I shall never sleep while he's in the house, dad." Clarry stole nearer and stared at his dark-

visaged brother on the bed. "Wouldn't it be better to let him go to-morrow?" he asked, wistfully.

"Go to bed," David commanded, in an undertone, "and leave to-morrow alone."

CHAPTER XII

THE scent of rain-drenched earth, the aroma of wattle drifting in from the wet gullies and slopes, failed to soothe the slow fever that burned in Hetty's mind. She had lain through the long night listening to the incoherent mutterings of the dream-tortured Clarry in the adjoining room.

At the first sign of day she saddled her pony with the intention of escaping, for one brief hour, the atmosphere of her surroundings. Once in the open, her thoughts grew clearer, saner. Instinctively she turned her pony's head towards Fitzallan's homestead. Since the arrest of Eustace the place had fascinated her beyond words. In the days when she had romped with the son of the cattle king her mind had been filled with childish dreams, dreams that hurt now, and would continue to hurt while life endured.

There had come to her, at times, during her long, mad excursions with Eustace, a dream fabric supported by the gossamer threads of childish fancy. She had pictured herself walking side by side with him through the long golden noons of life, and by a similar trick of child-like reasoning she had included the beautiful homestead at Wahgunyah as the last fabric in her airily weaved romance.

She regarded it now, through a break in the pines, over the stretches of wind-rifled silver grass, until her mind cried against the unreality of her very existence.

Smoke was drifting over the station outbuildings. One or two figures were discernible moving about the stockyards. She rode closer in until her pony stood rubbing its neck against the gate. Sighing wearily, she was about to return homeward when she caught a sound in her rear, as though some one were calling her name. Wheeling her pony, she beheld the minister's white-coated figure approaching in her direction. He was soon within speaking distance, a little out of breath, perhaps, but smiling affably.

"I am pleased to see you, Miss Bellinger," he said quickly. "Owing to Eustace's terrible misfortune I have been prevented from calling upon your people."

"Have you seen Eustace?" she asked, in a steady voice. "We get so little news out here."

"I heard from him, through his father, only yesterday. He is very well, considering, poor fellow. We have hopes, Miss Bellinger, merely hopes, that the lightning will not strike." He stood in the track wiping his hot face, his sun-helmet tilted towards the back of his head. "Simon has provided him with the very best counsel, but I fear there is no shelter from the lightning," he concluded, mysteriously.

"The case will go against him, you think?"

"I fear so, Miss Bellinger; I fear so. It is

going to be the shortest trial in the history of Queensland. There is no doubt that Eustace has been the victim of circumstances, and his own wretched impulses. The affair was an accident, I feel confident—a mere slip of the trigger-finger.”

“And if he is found guilty?” The words left her in a stifled undertone. “What do you think will happen?”

He returned her glance, and she saw a frightened look in his eyes—a look of evasion and terror.

“Won’t you answer me?” Her pony shied restlessly from the white ‘kerchief in his hand and the strange sun-helmet.

“Certainly, certainly, Miss Bellinger. I’m afraid if he is found guilty that the law will presumably take its course.”

Hetty reined in her pony, and stared along the endless line of fences that flanked the eastern boundary of Wahgunyah. Under her pulsing vision the very stones seemed to throb in the morning light. A few stray cattle moved across the distant flat. The silence struck sharp upon her terrified senses.

“Surely they won’t let him die—his father, I mean.” She gestured vehemently, in spite of herself.

“Die! no one wants Eustace to die. We desire that he should live. But we are not the Government. If the most brilliant advocate in the country cannot save him, what are we to do, Miss Bellinger? There are men in Simon’s employ who would venture life and liberty to see Eustace free; men who have

known him since childhood. Yet if the lightning strikes we must bear it."

The minister's early cheerfulness evaporated by degrees ; dejection that comes with the knowledge of inability to render service sat upon him now.

At that moment the daughter of David Bellinger was moved between two infernos of emotion. Yet some hidden force, some breath of kinship prevented her crying out her brother's red-handed complicity in the Josephs' tragedy. Again and again she desired to speak what she knew to this clear-voiced minister of God, and again the words were checked by the instinct of family preservation.

Yet she could not allow Eustace to suffer the extreme penalty of the law. She must do something—and swiftly.

Her pony reefed and side-stepped in the stony track. She was conscious of the minister walking beside her, his head bent abstractedly, his hands locked behind his back. He began to talk of Simon in Brisbane, of his affairs at the homestead, but his words fell dead when they lacked immediate reference to Eustace ; it was only when his voice took on a new tone that her attention became fixed.

"Another tragic element has obtruded into the business," he was saying ; "another unlooked-for incident that will sadly harass and humiliate Eustace and his father. I am speaking of Eustace's fiancée, Miss Fortescue, who arrived here from the city yesterday. The poor young lady is not yet aware of his terrible position. Simon thought it

better that she should remain in ignorance for a little while at least."

"His fiancée! What do you mean?" Hetty asked.

"The story will scarcely bear telling," he answered. "Eustace became attached to her in England. She is the only daughter of Captain Fortescue, an army man, I gather. Eustace was certainly indiscreet in keeping his engagement a mystery. Mysteries are embarrassing at a time when one is fighting for one's life."

"She doesn't know that Eustace is—is in prison?"

"Oh, dear, no. She has only been in the country a few hours, so to speak. We must give her breathing time before we break the dreadful news." Mr. Mason picked his nail with a certain show of irritation in his manner. "I must admit, though, that I do not enjoy the position thrust upon me—of fending off her persistent inquiries concerning the whereabouts of young Fitzallan."

"Did—did Simon know that his son had become engaged to Miss Fortescue in England?" Hetty's voice had grown faint, almost indistinct. The minister's distracted mind alone prevented him noting the swooning clutch of her hands on the bridle. He imagined that she was merely interested in Eustace's welfare.

"Not a word of it ever reached Simon. She came, I must confess, like a bolt from the blue. Simon, I learn, behaved splendidly. There was no other way to accept the situation. Miss Fortescue is hardly to blame."

Hetty's surprise and amazement passed, leaving her cold and silent. The morning air seemed to have grown thick and unfit to breathe; it hurt her throat until suffocation almost threatened to unseat her. The shortened reins held her in the saddle. Not for a moment did she lose her grip of them.

A rise in the ground brought them to a more open, windier space; the sweet air touched her cheek, and gave back the life and colour to her face. In the quick surge of returning emotions it occurred to her that Eustace was little better than her brother Martin. The one had shot a stranger to gratify a temporary feeling of resentment, the other had dragged the lives of two women into the dust with him. She had discovered within the last few minutes that she was the other woman.

She was conscious of the minister's voice, the flow of irrelevant talk that passed unheeded now. Her little world was destroyed, knocked about her ears in the fetch of a breath. Her attention was riveted only when he sought to praise Miss Fortescue.

"She is the sweetest creature imaginable," he was saying. "Knows very little of the world, and is fairly well educated. I really wish you could see her, Miss Bellinger. She is very much alone at present. Mrs. Prendegast, the housekeeper, is the only woman she has met so far."

"Where are Mr. Fitzallan's neighbours?" came a little sullenly from David's daughter. "The Prescott women I used to see driving up to the house."

Mr. Mason shook his head dismally. "I'm afraid that Eustace's trouble has cost Simon many friendships, Miss Bellinger."

Hetty did not wait to hear more. With a half-uttered good-bye she returned homeward through the pine scrub, where the rock wallabies peeped from the boulders at her brooding figure as she rode past.

Eustace the martyr, sitting in his prison cell, scarcely appealed to her now. Her mind had fallen into the abyss of despair, where there is neither light nor hope.

Her father was leaning over the paddock rail when she rode up to the cottage. He appeared more thoughtful than usual; his voice had grown sharper.

"Where been, Het?" he inquired, with bush brevity. "We had to cook our own breakfast."

"I'm sorry, dad," she answered, dismounting. "I've been worrying about two or three people's lives this morning."

"Two or three?" David straightened his big shoulders; his brow became creased. "Who's number three, Het?"

"A woman, no less. And of all the silly complications that——" Hetty turned her pony adrift in the paddock, pitched the saddle to the waiting Clarry, and walked indoors without another word.

David whistled softly, fidgeted with the stem of his pipe, and, as an afterthought, refrained from lighting it. "A woman!" he muttered. "Now what in thunder is she driving at?"

Simon Fitzallan, who possessed neither wife nor daughter, considered himself an infallible judge of the female mind. David, who had passed a certain number of years in his daughter's society, and was accustomed to her every mood and whim, confessed that his knowledge of the sex was becoming daily more fleeting and rudimentary.

He knew by the movements inside the house that something unusual had happened. A plate crashed on the kitchen floor; then he heard the pieces being swept feverishly aside. David leaned on the rail very patiently, until the sounds abated within. Martin had not attempted to leave the house. He had made a pretence of busying himself about the place all morning; but David was not so easily deceived. Once his vigilance slackened, and, presto, Martin would be gone!"

The house grew strangely quiet. Clarry was sinking post-holes on their western boundary; the parrot, usually talkative in the earlier part of the day, preened itself sleepily on its perch. David stole indoors, and discovered his daughter sitting in a shadowed corner of the room, very still, very thoughtful, she seemed to him.

David rarely broke the silence when he entered a room. For a man so large he moved with ease and circumspection, bringing with him always an air of repose and tranquillity.

Hetty was aware of his presence, but did not look up. David felt now, as he had often done during periods of stress and affliction, that his daughter was very much alone, and relying on his

advice and guidance. Playing the part of a mother to his family suited his big kindly nature. But there were occasions when he assumed the rôle of the stern inquisitor.

"You don't seem to have got much from your early ride, Het. I remember the time when your pony brought you home singin' and as full of play as a young 'possum. What's the trouble?"

He sat beside her, and his fingers touched her stooping shoulders gently. It relieved him greatly to discover that she was not crying, but he hardly approved of the bleak, shiftless stare in her eyes. He waited patiently until she answered him, and he remembered long afterwards that her eyes remained staring at something far away.

"Dad, I've been a fool since I can remember. I learned things at school, in Brisbane, that made me discontented and unhappy. There I was Miss Bellinger, daughter of a well-to-do cattle man. I know you denied Clarry and Martin many things for my sake. They went without boots pretty often so that I could pick up a lot of French phrases and play pieces like the 'Blue Danube' on the school piano.

"Dozens of other poor farmers were doing the same with their sons and daughters. The man who couldn't afford a reaper and binder, or tanks for the household use, scraped money together to pay a lot of extravagant school fees for his children."

"But . . . a bit of eddication isn't a hard thing to carry, Het!" broke from the astonished David. "It was only fair to give you a clean start in life."

"Where did Martin's start come in, dad? Where did Clarry's? Well, Eustace came here, dragging his tutor with him very often. We liked him—you did, I'm certain, and Clarry ran to his heel like a friendly collie every time he ventured into our paddock."

"You didn't, Het, thank goodness!" David exclaimed, devoutly. "Always a bit more sense about you than the boys."

Hetty's foot tapped the floor. A luminous quality had come into her eyes that escaped her father. She continued speaking, her chin resting in her half-clenched hand. "At school I was taught things, but not by the teachers, dad. One lot of girls said I was a fool not to marry Eustace Fitzallan. He was the best catch north of the border. His father was worth a quarter of a million pounds. Why didn't I marry the boy? He was mine for the asking, they said.

"But these creatures were only suggesting what had been in my own mind, dad, although I had never considered Eustace from the money point of view. So I spun my own little airy castles about him until I looked upon him as my secret property. Then, one day at school, came the news—from a country paper, I think—that the mounted troopers were hunting you and Clarry for lifting cattle off the Fitzallan estates. That broke up my *mana* at the seminary. I was tabooed and promptly told to get. I came home, and heard that Eustace had gone to Oxford.

"I found things very slow here, dad, what with

cooking by that old camp oven and Martin's boorishness and evil ways. Then came the shock of Eustace's home-coming. Now, dad, just look at my little dream palace. I put on my best frock the other morning to meet him near his own gate.

"We met, and, frankly, I didn't care for him a scrap. You know he isn't bad looking, but somehow he'd grown out of my palace. He was no longer a boy, and I distinctly remember him making remarks about his property and his father's cattle."

"Go on, Het," growled David. He was like a child now listening to a story, parts of which had hitherto escaped him.

"Yes, I saw that he had grown too big for my little palace," she went on. "He had grown into one of those young gentlemen who do not fit easily into one's dreams—my dreams, anyhow. Still, I thought that he might be worth the winning. It is a grand thing, after all, to see your dreams come true. As a child I pictured myself as the fairy mistress of Wahgunyah station. In my dreams Simon was always gentle and forbearing, always smiled when Eustace walked beside me on the lawns or through the homestead gardens. Then——"

She paused, holding her temples a little fiercely. "Then Martin broke up the dream with his gun. A Jew that we didn't know from Adam got into the garden, so to speak, and down comes the palace. For the past week or so I've been holding Eustace up as a martyr, a victim of my brother's cowardice, and so forth. My heart was ready to bleed; I

was even prepared to end my days in a convent as the blighted girl who loved the ruined young aristocrat. That would have been some kind of a finish; it looked a dreamy ending to a very nasty upbringing, and I was almost beginning to feel satisfied. When——”

Hetty paused again to moisten her lips. The ghost of a smile flitted across her face, revealing a touch of that precious humour which had saved her from the abyss of self-pity and denunciation. “This Miss Fortescue came into the garden,” she said at last; “the girl from England who has been in the picture all the time while I was chasing cows and cooking pumpkins in the old camp oven.”

David fidgeted in his chair. Her strange humour and lack of outward emotion filled him with uneasiness. “Who’s Miss Fortescue?” he asked, bluntly. “I don’t quite cotton to most of your story, Het. Is this Miss Fortescue anything to do with Eustace?”

“She’s come from England to marry him, dad. Isn’t it funny?”

David was not sure whether his daughter was laughing or crying. Her shoulders quivered slightly; her face was hidden in her hands.

“Het, I don’t understand you. I hope this blessed business hasn’t turned your head. Better have a lie down an’ sleep it off, eh? The sun’s been mighty hot this mornin’.”

“Dad, if I were to lie down and sleep too long we’d mix things badly. It would be a terrible end

to my dream-pictures if they hanged Eustace Fitzallan. Suppose we consult a lawyer, and tell him the whole truth ? ”

David's lips tightened ; his kindly eyes narrowed painfully. “ You mean that we'd better give Marto away ? Seems to me, Het, you've been crying out a bit too soon. Let's talk it over to-morrow.”

“ Dad, there will be very few to-morrows for me if this wretched Eustace is allowed to hang. I spoke to Mr. Mason this morning. He says the public and Press are crying for a conviction. They want to see an end to all squatter-made law. Hang the rich as well as the poor is their maxim now. They want Eustace as an example.”

“ Nonsense, Het ! ” David rose from the chair, suddenly. “ There's no fear of Eustace bein' hanged. Why, old Simon could buy half the juries in the land ! He could make 'em each a present of a ten-thousand acre farm ; stock it for 'em into the bargain. You're a bit hasty, Het,” he added, with a touch of impatience.

“ We must tell the truth, dad,” she insisted. “ Are you listening ? ”

“ Send your brother to the gallows to save a man who was your sweetheart. Put the police on his track . . . for that money-lender, Josephs ! ”

Not for an instant did Hetty's presence of mind desert her. Yet she could have cried out in her bitterness of spirit. She had long regarded her own silence in the matter as iniquitous, but now that the truth had been laid bare she expected

David to assist her in averting a possible miscarriage of justice.

"Dad, we must tell the truth, or some part of it. Let Martin take his chance, and never mind Eustace having been my sweetheart. We were never more than friends. If you won't help me, dad, I'll go to Brisbane and speak the whole truth to one of the justices of the peace."

Her set tones and restrained manner disturbed David. He tried to think quickly, to match her unfaltering arguments with some plausible excuse for delay. "Het," he began, hoarsely, "they'd say you'd turned Judas on your own flesh and blood. I don't think you'd cut a very nice figure in the witness-box swearing away the life of your brother. Give me till to-morrow to think it over. This trial will last another day or two. If I'd given Martin a better chance things might have been different. Maybe if he'd gone to a city school for a year or two, same as you, Het, he'd have reasoned things much better. Dunno that we've helped the lad much. He just grew up with the kangaroos and dingoes with some kind of a soul inside him. And the very first time he draws blood—he was bound to bite sooner or later—you want me, his father, to play the policeman. Now, Het, my girl, what's it goin' to be?" he demanded. "Play at Judas or give him another chance?"

Again Hetty felt herself slipping from her hard-won resolve. She told herself a hundred times that Eustace Fitzallan was nothing to her. All thought of kinship had been overridden by her

passionate sense of justice. Martin must take his chance; the other man, Eustace, had not been offered one. The term Judas, as applied to one who sought to free an innocent man from the gallows, sounded bitter and unreal she thought.

She looked up suddenly into David's face and instinctively her hand sought his.

"Dad, you'll have to give Eustace a chance for his life," she almost pleaded. "Only the other day you told us how he had saved you from gaol when those squatters planted their cattle in our paddocks. Give him a chance, dad."

She was conscious that her father was retreating from the room. He paused in the doorway, his brow knitted, his shoulders slightly bent.

"I'll think it over, Het. Don't push me too far. I must think for Martin too."

CHAPTER XIII

THE Reverend Gerard Mason returned to Wahgunyah homestead, after his interview with Hetty Bellinger, as though anxious to regain the cool shelter of the house. His room overlooked an expanse of lawn and garden set with dahlias and rare Japanese chrysanthemums. He was not long in changing his heavy boots for a pair of grass-woven slippers, and after having inspected his reflection in the mirror, somewhat critically, he ventured to the broad, palm-shaded verandah outside.

A silk hammock swung where a delightful air current swept through the wide-open doors near the front entrance. Gerard Mason regarded the silk hammock as his special property during his visits to Wahgunyah homestead. Approaching softly, he caught the glitter of a silver shoe buckle dangling over the tasselled edge. A flowing white sleeve, supported by a delicately moulded arm, swung slowly to and fro. The hand held a purple-backed volume of Keats. A delightful scent of violets was wafted towards him, with each pendulating movement of the hammock.

Miss Fortescue poised herself above the hammock edge at sound of the slippered feet beside her.

Then she yawned with inimitable artistry behind the book of poetry.

"I thought it might have been Eustace," she declared, wearily. "I am beginning to think that he has forgotten me."

The minister sighed before responding. "He kept the news of your coming so very secret that we must allow him all the blame for present inconveniences. Eustace is a dear, good fellow, Miss Fortescue. We must do our best to survive his absence for another day or so."

Miss Fortescue put aside her book and leaned upon the hammock edge, exposing her beautiful white forearm and throat.

"I have been wondering what terrible business can keep him beyond reach of post and telegraph. If I had his address I might communicate with him."

For two whole days the minister had fended off her inquiries. No man dreaded the lie direct more than he. To him there was no greater abomination than the word which conveyed an untruth. Extreme finesse and patience had been exercised to keep within the bounds of strict veracity. Yet each fresh word and question, advanced so innocently, threatened to bring about his downfall.

"Telegraphs and post offices are not plentiful in this country, Miss Fortescue. A traveller may easily find himself several hundred miles from a penny stamp or a telegraph operator," he urged.

"A celebrated writer once admitted that he was twenty miles from a lemon," she responded, pen-

sively. "Can one really be three hundred miles from a postage stamp, Mr. Mason?"

Mr. Mason pointed out the difference between England and the vast unchartered regions north of Maranoa River, where it was possible for a man to wander beyond reach of human ken. Yet, never once did he suggest that Eustace was beyond the Maranoa. He explained things guardedly, with a tremulous avoidance of any direct statement that might reveal the true state of affairs.

He was not slow to note the little shadow of suspicion that crossed her occasionally. For two days he had laboured to dispel the enforced monotony of the surroundings. In his heart he pitied this fair newcomer who had ventured incredible distances to join her fiancé. He could not tell her that Eustace was at that moment being tried for his life. It would have seemed to him an act of barbarity. Until the end was certain the facts must be withheld from her. There was still a chance of acquittal, he thought, and Eustace could be left to make his own precious explanations.

In his brief acquaintance with Miss Fortescue, the young minister had gathered something of her story. Reticent at first, his winning manner, combined with his spiritual occupation, had invited her confidence. He learned of her family's impecunious circumstances, of her mother, a much-harassed English lady who desired above all things to see her daughter comfortably settled in life. She had offered a strenuous resistance at first, when Eustace had pressed Cynthia to join him in Queens-

land. On receipt of the young Oxonian's cheque for £200, to defray the expenses of the journey, her father had made a desperate effort, at the last moment, to provide her with a companion on the voyage out.

An Oxford lady, journeying to New South Wales to join her husband in Sydney, had promised to chaperon Cynthia as far as Brisbane, where it was understood that Eustace and his friends would be waiting to receive her. Her meeting with Simon was briefly told, and all that remained to complete her part of the engagement was the presence of Eustace Fitzallan.

The minister paced the verandah in his grass slippers expectant and just a little afraid of his fair questioner. Each moment, since her arrival at Wahgunyah, had emphasised the growing distrust in her eyes. Where was Eustace? What manner of business was it that kept him from coming to her instantly?

At the behest of her father, she had almost forfeited her self-respect in her attempt to keep faith with her fiancé. Her family's impoverished circumstances had decided her. But now that she was in Queensland, settled amid luxurious surroundings of the Fitzallan homestead, she felt something of the shame and uncertainty of her position.

She watched Mr. Mason in his walk, viewed his grass slippers and carefully arranged necktie with evident interest. He was not more than twenty-six, she thought. It seemed a pity that a clergyman of such brilliant promise should pass his best

years in the vicinity of a Queensland cattle station. What was his mission in the wilderness? Preaching to the brain-starved denizens of the bush, christening babies born in the gullies and mining camps, burying the dead, and comforting the lonely ones that were left behind. These were among his ordinary duties, she felt certain. A noble profession, capable of fulfilment only by those who heard the crying of voices in the dark corners of the earth. Then she remembered Eustace.

Sitting up, she permitted her light shoes to skim the verandah surface as the hammock pendulated slowly. "I want you to tell me," she began, in her soft English voice, "as a minister of the Church, and a man of honour, exactly what you know about Eustace Fitzallan, Mr. Mason."

He paused in his walk, like one brought suddenly to bay. His face was crimson. "My dear Miss Fortescue, really I——"

"Will you answer me directly, Mr. Mason?"

"I fear I cannot." He was white-lipped now, and she had ceased to smile upon him.

"Are you his friend, Mr. Mason?"

"Yes; I would sacrifice the remaining years of my life to serve him"—this vehemently.

"Does he require your service—at present? Is he in need of your help?" She knew now that he was striving heart and brain to conceal something, she knew not what.

He breathed deeply, as one accustomed to uttering words of consolation to mankind. "I fear that a

great many people need my help, Miss Fortescue. In this instance Eustace Fitzallan is no exception."

The loud cracking of a whip cut the silence. A lumbering, dust-covered coach trundled into view, and drew up with a squealing of brakes at the homestead gate. Slowly, ponderously, the driver descended from his seat and approached the house, carrying a bundle of newspapers and letters in his hand.

Halting at the verandah, he deposited the bundle, as was his custom, at the door entrance. Straightening his shoulders, the mailman threw a glance in the minister's direction.

"Pretty hot this mornin', parson," he declared with zest. "S'pose you've heard the awful news?"

Mr. Mason shook a clenched fist from behind Miss Fortescue, gesticulated frantically towards the pile of letters and newspapers on the verandah. His animated dumb show had little or no effect on the offending mailman.

"I only heard it this mornin'," he added, significantly. "Pretty rotten business for old Simon, sir. Good mornin'!" He returned to his coach wondering, vaguely, what the minister meant by skipping and threatening him behind the lady's back. It was so unlike the parson, he thought.

Miss Fortescue sighed as she regarded the pile of papers; then, as though overcome by an irresistible impulse, shot forward from the hammock, and seized the bundle. In a flash he was beside her, gasping for breath.

"Those papers are addressed to me," he panted. "I am very sorry, Miss Fortescue, but, er, really——"

"I always imagined a newspaper was common property in every home," she retorted. "And I haven't heard a scrap of news from the outside world for nearly a week. I feel, this morning, that I am three hundred miles from a post office, indeed!"

Shaking open a paper, she sat on the hammock edge deliberately, and commenced to read. The minister threw up his hands in a gesture of hopeless abandonment. Then he followed her swift glance as she devoured the scare-headed lines before her. He waited patiently until a sudden, steely flash disturbed her eyes. Then he cowered from the expected thunderbolt.

She had risen from the hammock, and was holding the newspaper at arm's length, as though it held some vile substance that poisoned the air.

"Why did you keep this horrible story from me? Why did you shield him?"

"I tried to spare your feelings only, Miss Fortescue, until his fate had been decided."

She was very pale; her hand clenched slightly over the newspaper. "I had a right to be informed of Eustace's position. Silence on your part was—was criminal, hateful."

Mrs. Prendegast, the housekeeper, appeared at that moment, the white wings of peace, in the shape of a napkin-covered tray, flowing in front of her. The situation presented itself in a flash; indeed, the minister's raised voice had warned her

some minutes before that the unexpected had happened.

Placing the tray on a small table, she stood a little stiffly before Miss Fortescue, as though waiting for her to speak. "A cup of tea, miss, will ease your nerves after what you've been reading in that paper," she suggested, icily.

"Thank you, but I'd rather not have tea at present. I would rather go to my room for a little while. This—this dreadful news has unnerved me."

Placing the paper in the hammock, and without a glance in the minister's direction, she retreated down the passage to her room.

Mrs. Prendegast picked up the offending journal and scanned its contents anxiously. "There'll be a husband less for some one if these larrikin attorneys have their way!" she exclaimed, bitterly. "The papers are hanging the boy already." She stabbed the eye-searing headlines with her forefinger as she read on. "And Simon put in the witness-box again to be blackguarded and bulldozed by the Crown Prosecutor. Heigho, poor Eustace!" she sighed. "Your father is blessing the day you came back from Oxford."

Strangely enough, Mr. Mason evinced not the slightest desire to read the paper. That the prosecuting counsel was driving home the terrible charge of murder with skill and overwhelming effect, he felt certain. Another day would decide the fate of the wretched young man who had brought ruin to others beside himself. Although convinced of

Eustace's innocence, he could not stem the spirit of bitterness and condemnation that welled within him.

Unable to settle himself at ease, he wandered across the yard, where a few of the station hands hung in groups, discussing the latest news in connection with the trial. Without wishing to be drawn into their excited conversation, he strayed into a narrow bush-track that led to the Bellingier homestead. A sudden clinking of bit and chain came from the fern-darkened covers on his right. A moment or two later Trooper Hannan ambled into view.

He saluted the minister at sight, wheeled his horse into the track, and dismounted nimbly. His face was slightly flushed and eager, his usually smart uniform somewhat soiled and disarranged, as though he had been crawling over soft earth and stones.

"I've been looking for a friend," he began hurriedly. "I hope, sir, that I have found one." He regarded the young minister a trifle anxiously.

"I trust so," was the non-committal reply. Startled by the unexpected greeting, Mr. Mason eyed the young officer closely. "I hope you are well after your recent labours," he said.

"Well in body and mind, sir, but troubled a bit over this Fitzallan case. I've just made a very important discovery in connection with the Josephs affair, and unless I can get some strong outside help, I fear that the authorities at headquarters will throw obstacles in my way."

"On whose behalf would the result of your discovery be submitted?" questioned the minister, "if I may ask."

Trooper Hannan responded without hesitation, "The prisoner Fitzallan. Enough to bring about his acquittal, if I am allowed a fair hearing, sir."

"Surely the police department will not throw obstacles in the way of your submitting fair evidence?" came from the now thoroughly aroused minister.

"What I have to submit in the way of fresh evidence will mean my dismissal from the service sooner or later," responded the trooper. "When the Department works up a case against a prisoner it never favours independent actions by one of its officers in upsetting the case. That is my position, anyhow," he continued, warmly. "But I am prepared to stake my billet to prove young Fitzallan's innocence. It isn't often a policeman runs amok among his seniors these times. I'll chance it, though, to get level with a certain official who referred to me the other day as a diligent upstart unfit to handle a common case of dog poisoning."

"This is not the time for personal amenities," the minister answered. "How can I help you?"

"Come with me, sir, to Echo Gully, where Josephs was found shot. We shall see then whether my senior officer Deemer thoroughly investigated his case before arresting young Fitzallan."

A type of colonial manhood rare enough in those days was Trooper Frank Hannan. Endowed with the fine instincts of his profession, alert and eager

to prove himself, even at the cost of an official snubbing, he had set himself the task of testing the validity of Sergeant Deemer's prosecution.

Since the arrest of Eustace he had dedicated much of his time in exploiting the vicinity of Echo Gully. At first his attention had been arrested by a series of footprints which ran in an unbroken line from the scene of the tragedy to the back verandah of the Bellinger homestead.

He had been puzzled to account for their presence even after he had identified them as belonging to Martin. Judged from an expert point of view, the date of their impression coincided with that of Josephs' and Eustace's. It became a matter of certainty to him that Martin had been close at hand during the time of the shooting.

A woman's footprints, which he knew to be Hetty's, mystified him at first, but he preferred to leave her out of his calculation until Martin's presence had been satisfactorily accounted for. On the second day of his investigations, a still closer search of the fern cover revealed a scarce visible hole in the trunk of a gum tree that stood about six yards in the rear of the fatal spot. After being probed with a jack-knife the hole gave up a small rifle bullet that had buried itself several inches in the wood.

Upon this small bullet hinged the real story of the Josephs shooting fatality. It was a much smaller projectile than the one found in the head of the young money-lender. And the point that first troubled Hannan was whether the bullet which

the police held at the trial could have been fired from Eustace's rifle.

It was a debatable point, and one upon which hung the life of the stockbreeder's son. Trooper Hannan related these things to the listening minister, as they entered Echo Gully, each point being made clear later by ocular demonstration of his theory.

"It has not occurred to Mr. Fitzallan's counsel to question whether the bullet found in Josephs' head, was really fired from Eustace's rifle," he said, finally. "The one in possession of the police is much heavier than an ordinary rifle bullet, and proves to me that the shot was actually fired from an old service weapon. I examined the rifle that Sergeant Deemer found in the river, although Deemer objected at the time, and if he had not taken his beliefs for granted he would have gauged the breech a little more closely. However, the fact seems to have escaped notice, so we'll push my theory a bit further."

"And the real culprit?" gasped the minister. "You, too, are not jumping in the dark, I hope?"

Trooper Hannan bit his moustache reticently, for, although he had personally sought the minister's confidence, yet the instincts of his profession prevented him voicing the culprit's name. The minister might be useful to him in corroborating certain details, if necessary; the word of a clergyman would go far to remove any doubt that might be cast upon the genuineness of his discovery.

Mr. Mason did not repeat his question, but accompanied the trooper to the fern cover, where

he was able to examine, at leisure, the bullet-mark in the tree immediately in a line with the spot where Josephs had fallen. Although an inexperienced bushman, he recognised the peculiar inturned foot-prints left by Martin in the soft earth. Only one man in the Engandine district was afflicted with an inturning left toe. He did not give voice to his thoughts ; neither did Hannan again mention the name of Bellinger as they rode from the gully.

" You must put these facts forward at once," Mr. Mason said, the moment they gained the road. " I will assist you in whatever you undertake. It is your plain duty and mine to bring the truth to light."

The trooper shortened rein, his face betraying a certain nervous anxiety. " I feel a bit scared of the Department, Mr. Mason. I'm moving single-handed in the affair, because I'm certain that my senior officer would have baulked me at the start. I'm playing a lone hand, and must chance failure. Good-bye ! "

Leaving the minister standing somewhat disconcerted in the track, he pushed forward into the gloom of the bush, where the sombre shadows soon engulfed him.

The sun had climbed to the edge of the lignum scrub in the far west ; below the sun's burning rim the sky wore a strange livery of wine red and opal. A few squatter pigeons trailed riverwards, where the blue grass softened the savage perspective of ridge and far-stretching plain.

Trooper Hannan regarded the flaring disc some-

what apprehensively. In a couple of hours darkness would be upon him to hamper his movements and give vantage to the man he was going to arrest. Earlier in the day he had dispatched his black boy in the direction of David's cottage with instructions to watch Martin's movements from the cover of the scrub.

The black boy was an experienced tracker, and genuinely fond of his work ; and so long as he remained on the Bellingers' boundary there was little fear of Martin slipping away into the hills.

In his self-imposed task of bringing the real slayer of Josephs into the dock, Trooper Hannan was actuated by no spirit of vindictiveness or malice against the Bellingers. To him David was a genial, kindly man, whose cattle-lifting exploits paled in comparison with the deeds of the gentlemen land-stealers who gridironed the country with their fences. Furthermore, 90 per cent of the cattle taken from the gullies were merely stragglers from the great overlanding mobs that passed from Queensland into New South Wales. It was against Sergeant Deemer his *coup* was aimed, the iron-grey veteran who had held him up to ridicule and scorn among his juniors ; Deemer, the prince of trackers, the strong, silent man whose career in the Queensland Mounted Police had been unmarred by a single blunder or indiscretion.

No one could say that Frank Hannan had played his senior false. During the initial investigations it was Hannan who suggested the terrible potentialities of the " unknown factor," only to be snubbed

for his pains. At the present moment Sergeant Deemer was the cynosure of eyes in the Queensland capital. His life story had been printed in several papers, while in others he had been eulogised as the smartest officer of the southern division. His speedy promotion to the post of superintendent was inevitable.

Trooper Hannan's thoughts went out to Hetty as he rode forward, the beautiful, clear-eyed girl who no more resembled her brother than a lyre-bird resembled a crow. He was sorry for David, big, soft-hearted David ; but more than anything else, he dreaded the scorn his action might bring from the sister of the culprit.

A year ago he fancied that the daughter of David stood alone among women in his memory. Times without number he had neglected urgent matters to ride close to the cottage in the hope of seeing her. All that must stand aside now. A trooper of Her Majesty's police had no friends, knew no affections when duty pointed the way.

The spell of the sunset pageant departed as he gained the second hill. Something of the professional sleuth entered him once the Bellinger homestead broke into view. The breech and lock action of his carbine was tested, and the weapon replaced in its leather bucket. That David would give him no trouble he felt confident. There might be harsh words, threats perhaps ; but neither Clarry nor David would offer armed resistance. Still, it were better to trust one's rifle rather than rely on the unknown temperament of a suddenly surprised household.

Trooper Hannan advanced cautiously. Securing his horse to a post he made a detour of the Bellinger selection, his carbine slung to his shoulder. Instinctively he approached the cottage from the rear, keeping between the horse paddock and the gate, knowing that if Martin sighted him he would endeavour to reach one of the animals near at hand.

The bullet-like whistle of a kite in the scrub behind was the signal from his black boy warning him of his near presence. The wind-scorched grass was hip-high in the paddock, and rustled like sword-blades against his leggings. An ominous silence pervaded the few outbuildings; for a moment or two his breath came quicker than usual, the slashing of the grass seemed loud enough to wake the dead. . . . And there was always a stray shot in the reckoning.

A few hasty strides carried him within the garden enclosure, where the clink of his spurs on the sun-baked path brought a hoarse cry of warning from within the cottage. It was Hetty's voice, and it was full of the girl's bitter anguish of spirit, as though she divined the cause of the trooper's sudden appearance.

David appeared in his lion-footed way, his great bulk barring the door. He made no gesture, offered no greeting beyond a calm dignified nod of recognition. Trooper Hannan paused a dozen paces from the door, alert as a panther about to spring.

"Martin at home?" he questioned, bluntly. "I'll see him if you've no objections, Mr. Bellinger."

David moved half a pace, gestured a little wearily,

as one who had long decided his course of action. "Marto's inside, Mr. Hannan. I think you had better go in."

The trooper stood his ground, busily calculating his chances of success or failure in the event of a sudden rear attack. A shadow receded swiftly from the window overlooking the yard; then a door closed, and he heard the slow breathing of some one in the passage.

"You'll have to go in if you want him," insisted David. "He's lazy to-day."

The grim irony of the invitation fell flat on the waiting trooper. For several seconds he deliberated on his next move, then with a nod to David he crossed the threshold alertly, paused in the sudden darkness as one caressing each moment of his life.

Not a tremor disturbed the silence of the inner rooms. The kitchen was deserted; the second room revealed a bed with the blankets tossed aside. Out in the passage again, he halted, and then leaped forward with an oath at sound of a window suddenly lifted. Dashing into the room he peered through the open window and saw Martin running towards the horse paddock.

"What I expected," he muttered, unslinging his carbine.

Leaning from the open window, he waited until Martin had gained the fence and was seizing the mane of a big bay horse that stood in a corner of the paddock.

"Ask him to stop!" the trooper called to David, "or there'll be a dead horse for sale."

"Call on him yourself," was David's reply. "He's your business, not mine."

Martin had mounted the horse and was urging it towards a half-lowered sliprail at the paddock end. Hannan leaned from the window and fired twice; the horse plunged wildly, staggered half a dozen yards, and pitched on its side. Martin was flung to earth, and lay for several seconds as though stunned and hurt. Rising, he ran for the shelter of the scrub, with backward glances over his shoulder.

Hannan had vaulted through the open window, and had reached the paddock fence before Martin was afoot. His carbine swung into line with the running figure.

"Stop, in the Queen's name," he thundered, "or I'll shoot."

Martin halted, turned his head, and grinned maliciously. "Come and fetch me, you . . . spy! Come closer." There was a sullen strength in his pose, a readiness to grapple with his armed pursuer.

"Another step, and I'll pile you alongside the horse." The trooper's carbine slanted into line wickedly. "Keep your hands up. So."

Martin sprang round, only to face the lithe-limbed black boy, who had crept from the scrub with a pair of handcuffs. At a nod from the trooper the aboriginal slipped them over the prisoner's wrists, ducking nimbly, as he did, to avoid the spiteful blow aimed at him by the scowling Martin.

David had witnessed his son's flight and capture

in a spirit of neutrality until the appearance of the black boy with the handcuffs. The jingling of the steel, the loud snap as they closed over Martin's wrists, seemed to shatter the last vestige of restraint and forbearance. Stepping into the kitchen, he snatched the carbine from its resting-place, and thrust open the window overlooking the paddock.

The shapes of the three men were sharply silhouetted in the growing dusk, Martin, his head bent and slightly in the foreground, the black boy and trooper standing to right and left.

Something closed with him as he raised the carbine, a pair of arms encircling him in a terror-stricken embrace.

"Dad . . . what are you going to do? Think a little, for God's sake!"

David stared down at his daughter, his chest labouring painfully as he sought to remove her clinging arms. "Let go, Het! I can't see that lad trussed and handcuffed without giving him a chance for a break. Two of 'em to one, an' me standin' by. Damn it, let go!"

"No, no, dad. Hannan isn't to blame. Shoot him, and they'll take you and Martin."

Never before had he felt the strength of his daughter's arms, the amazing tenacity of those shapely brown hands. Her strength and quickness annoyed, maddened him, and for one blind moment he raised the gun stock as though to smash her grey, frightened face cowering at his knees. But in that swift downward glance he caught the shadow

of his dead wife's face envisaged in hers. His strength relaxed ; his head nodded dully.

"Het," his big hand fell to her shoulder ; "I was near to bein' a damned fool," he said huskily.

He allowed her to take the carbine from him, and to replace it over the mantel. Something of the conflict between father and daughter, the high-spoken words and cries, reached Hannan. He retreated hastily into the scrub with his prisoner, feeling that David might be tempted to effect his son's escape if he remained long in sight of the cottage.

His work, as yet, was only half completed. There was still the carbine to be accounted for. Without it all evidence of Martin's guilt would count for naught. It was the weapon which had killed Josephs, and he had to prove that the bullet in possession of the police had been fired from it.

Attaching a chain to the prisoner's handcuffs, he secured it with a padlock to a tree, and after a few instructions to the watchful black boy, slipped once more in the direction of the cottage.

David had gone to the front verandah, and was sitting with his face sunk in his hands, his thoughts turning upon his son's unexpected arrest, and the future which held so little promise for his remaining son and daughter.

The kitchen was in darkness ; Hetty had returned to the front room in the expectation of seeing her unfortunate brother pass with Hannan down the Engandine road visible from where she sat.

Clarry had taken the dogs, earlier in the day,

for a ramble through the gullies. He frequently returned about dark with a few 'possum skins dangling from his belt. Upon this occasion he shrank from borrowing Martin's carbine, haunted, no doubt, by the memory of its recent grim achievement.

Trooper Hannan, with his spurs tucked in his pocket, passed into the kitchen without sound, and lifted down the weapon from the mantel. Passing on tiptoe through the open door, he regained the paddock without mishap.

The black boy was squatting near the prisoner's feet when he joined them. Martin's savage comments on troopers and their precious tactics, together with his fits of overwhelming rage, failed to disturb Hannan's fixity of purpose.

CHAPTER XIV

TROOPER HANNAN desired to reach the lock-up at Engandine without delay. Far away on the range-sheltered flat, the lights of Wahgunyah station showed beyond the intervening belts of coolibah trees. Once at Engandine, he would be able to board the early train for Brisbane, and report himself and his prisoner at headquarters.

There would be the usual formalities and interrogations, by certain hide-bound officials, who would seek to prevent him from interfering with Sergeant Deemer's case against Eustace Fitzallan. The step he had taken would bring him into collision with his superiors, for the Queensland Police Department bitterly resented individual interference that might lead to the acquittal of a half-convicted prisoner. But once the jury and public were convinced of young Fitzallan's innocence, he felt that his action would meet with universal approval. His entry into Brisbane, with Martin Bellinger in custody, would be one of the most dramatic incidents in the history of Queensland criminal law.

Martin had been placed astride the black boy's horse, his wrists and legs firmly secured to the saddle. The grinning black boy led the animal by the bridle down the steep track where the faint

moonrays pierced the wind-shaken creepers and wonga vines.

About a mile from Wahgunyah a stockrider clattered into view, and drew aside in the narrow bridle track to allow the party a little footway. Hannan saw that he was carrying a newspaper across his saddle front.

The stockrider hailed him familiarly, having recognised, at a distance, the uniforms of the black boy and the trooper. Halting their horses for a moment, Hannan discovered at a glance that the man was one of Simon's numerous employees.

The stockrider stared fixedly at Martin, and barely suppressed a laugh. "Got one of 'em at last. Cattle or sheep?" he asked, pointedly.

Hannan shrugged evasively. "I can't discuss my prisoner's affairs with any one, Tom Jeffries. A man is innocent until he is proved guilty. What's the latest news, anyhow?" he added, indicating the newspaper that was tied to the other's saddle-front.

"Bad news for us, Hannan; bad news for the Engandine district." The stockrider spoke with a touch of genuine sorrow in his voice.

Hannan fidgeted in his saddle; his sunburnt hands stroked the sweating shoulder of his horse.

"What news is it, Jeffries?" he asked, quietly. "Surely the case isn't finished!"

"They finished with Eustace," nodded the stockrider. "The jury retired for twenty minutes, and brought in a verdict of wilful murder. Simon's counsel seemed to go to pieces. All that Sir Julian

could say was that Eustace was not responsible for his actions."

"Was—was that Eustace's only defence?" came from Hannan, "irresponsibility of action?"

"Oh, there was a lot of scientific guff talked about brain-storms and the accused's inherited weaknesses. Nobody believed a word of it evidently. The judge in his summing-up said so, pretty plain too."

"Any recommendation to mercy added?"

"No. Judge Wendover told the jury that it was a deliberate and wanton act of murder. The case was as clear to him as if he had been there, he said."

A suppressed laugh came from behind the trooper, hoarse, malicious, and ill-concealed. Peering forward, he glanced sternly in the prisoner's direction; but the face of Martin Bellinger was wrapped in shadow, while the black boy standing at the horse's head appeared unconscious of what was happening.

The stockman refolded his newspaper and remembered suddenly that Trooper Hannan had been concerned with the arrest of Eustace. The thought checked any further reference to the case, although Hannan pressed him for details.

With a half-muttered "Good-night," he rode away in the direction of Wahgunyah station. Puzzled somewhat by his change of manner, Trooper Hannan pushed on in the hope of reaching Engandine before midnight. His hopes received an unlooked-for check. About two miles from the Engandine main track Martin's horse exhibited signs of lameness that became more acute as they hurried over

a patch of thorn-bush country which flanked the hip of the range.

There was still a long way to travel before the railway siding was reached, at Engandine, and Hannan knew that his sullen-tempered prisoner could not cover the distance on foot in less than four hours.

Halting at the bottom of the thorn-strewn slope, a fire was kindled and some tea made. Hannan produced cold mutton and bread from his wallet, cut several huge slices for the black boy and his prisoner, reserving only a small amount for himself.

Stooping near the horse's fetlock he examined it critically, and located a spike-end of cactus bush protruding from the flesh. Extracting it carefully, with the aid of his service knife, he bandaged the wound with a strip of 'kerchief, and began his supper. A few hours' rest would enable him to continue his journey. He was not anxious to lame permanently a high-spirited horse, which had cost the Queensland Government forty guineas at least.

A chain was made fast to Martin's handcuffs, and padlocked to a pine-tree on his right. "I've no blanket for you, Bellinger," he said, with a touch of sympathy in his voice. "You are welcome to my cape, though, if it turns cold."

"I'm all right," Martin growled, settling himself close to the warm, dry earth. "I'll have my share of the mutton now, if you don't mind. I'm feeling peckish after the ride."

The meat and some bread were placed beside

him, and he ate wolfishly, while Hannan and the black boy squatted close to the boxwood fire. In the near background the two horses nibbled at the thin shoots of grass that sprouted from the stony hollows. As the night advanced the air nipped with blade-edge keenness. Hannan kicked the fire into leaping flames, tossed a blanket to the boy, and settled himself nearer the comforting blaze.

Martin curled himself at the foot of the tree, his handcuffs clinking audibly whenever he sought to shift his position. Like most bush-born men, he experienced a certain warmth and pleasure in lying close to the earth. The touch of wind-dried grass against his cheek, the soft rustling of the overhead leaves soothed his fretting impatience. Never again, perhaps, would he lie in the open or feel the keen mountain air in his lungs. Once the prison gates closed on him his beloved gullies and creeks would become things of the past.

Past midnight Trooper Hannan stretched himself a little wearily beside the reddening fire, determined to snatch an hour's repose, at least, before day broke. Once or twice Martin glanced from the darkness of the tree shadow to the sleeping face of the trooper silhouetted against the fireglow. Gently, imperceptibly almost, he raised a piece of mutton fat from the ground and held it between his teeth, rubbing it against his manacled wrists. Slowly, and with infinite pains, he greased the backs of his hands, scarce daring to raise himself into a sitting posture lest the sharp-eyed black boy might raise an alarm.

With his wrists and thumb-joints thoroughly anointed, Martin submitted himself to the slow, flesh-racking operation of slipping his gyves.

To some men this business is an instinct, to others it comes only after painful lacerations of the flesh and wrist joints, endurable only when life and liberty are at stake.

Martin was a big-boned young man, with muscle-packed arms and biceps, and it seemed to him as if the sinews of his hands were being torn asunder in the fierce struggle to be free of his fetters. With his left hand at liberty he dragged at the remaining loop of steel, forcing it towards the thumb ball with tigerish insensibility to pain. Again and again he paused in his task to reanoint the bleeding parts, as he wore the steel ring bit by bit over the tortured wrist and thumb joint. It came, at last, over his hand with an unexpected clink that caused him to lie back, scarce daring to breathe, watching the effect of the sound on the trooper and the black boy.

The aboriginal's head was sunk between his knees where he squatted by the fire. Hannan's only response was a noisy inhalation of breath that sounded like music to the son of David. Raising himself into a sitting position, Martin breathed deeply, like one taking his fill of life-giving air. About twenty paces separated him from the sleeping trooper, enough ground to allow that officer to awake and shoot him down even though he possessed the springing powers of a lion.

He was also aware that many troopers never

slept while on duty, but merely reclined in a sleeping attitude until their limbs were partially rested.

Now, if he could creep forward ten paces and run the remaining ten he would catch his man in the act of rising. His animal instincts told him that the more finely developed trooper would prove no match for his bull strength and gripping power. Once his hands closed on throat or body the game would be over. He was confident, too, that the black boy would not render Hannan the slightest aid.

Crawling forward, on his chest, he wriggled snake-like along the ground, keeping in the arm of shadow cast by the tree, until he lay exposed on the edge of the fire-lit space.

Hannan had not moved ; his carbine rested beside him, while his right hand lay half clenched over the stock. Martin's eye travelled across the intervening space, and judged to the fraction of an inch the exact part of the trooper's anatomy he could reach in a single bound.

He rose from the earth as a runner leaps from a mark, and flashed upon the recumbent trooper. The sound of his feet on the stones brought Hannan's head up with a jerk, both hands gripping his carbine. For one brief moment the fireglow baffled his eyes and spoilt his aim.

Martin met the crimson flash with the snarl of a wild beast, and the powder smoke stung his palate.

"You got me dead easy, eh, Mr. Policeman? You and your damned darbies! Try me now."

He seemed to jerk the trooper from his feet, his left arm gaining a dexterous strangle hold on the officer's chin and throat. For a fraction of time they reeled and struggled in the glow of the fire, until Martin's grip had forced him to the ground. Twisting the carbine from his hand, he struck down savagely once, twice, at the upturned face, and then, as though to glut his insensate fury, kicked the supine form as it rolled over the sloping ground into the bushes.

Turning sharply, he saw that the black boy had bolted down the track. Approaching the trooper's horse, he unfastened the hobbles and mounted quickly.

He drew rein, half way up the ascent, and listened intently. An unmistakable groaning sound came from the bushes where Trooper Hannan had rolled. Then silence followed, which almost suggested that he had succumbed to the terrible blows inflicted by the carbine stock.

Martin laughed grimly as he stooped to break a switch from the bushes; then, with a last look over his shoulder, rode leisurely in the direction of the hills.

Some three hours later, when the dawn was whitening the east, Hannan's black boy presented himself at Wahgunyah homestead in a highly excited condition. Wong Lee, the Chinese cook, was first to interrogate the fear-stricken tracker. Their high-pitched voices awoke Mr. Mason, who dressed hurriedly and took upon himself the task of elucidating the aboriginal's story.

The boy recounted, with native fluency, the story of the attack on Trooper Hannan by Martin Bellinger and his escape into the hills. The minister listened attentively, and it was obvious to him that a new tragedy had been added to the old. Constable Hannan, the only living person who could have rendered assistance to Eustace, was in all probability beyond human aid.

"Mine thinkit that Bellinger feller one bad debil!" the black boy concluded. "Him kill um two feller now—Missa Hannan an' jackeroo feller Josephs. Baal, him get away too."

A party of station hands set out immediately for the spot where Martin had slipped his gyves. Hannan was discovered unconscious in the ferns, a fearful gash on his frontal bone. The party returned bearing him very gently to the station homestead, while one of their number rode into Engandine for a doctor.

The minister had informed Miss Fortescue of Hannan's prospective mission to the Bellingers with a view to the arrest of the real culprit in the Josephs tragedy. He had assured her, almost beyond doubt, that although a judge and jury had found Eustace guilty of the crime, the new evidence forthcoming would undoubtedly bring about a new trial and the acquittal of her fiancé.

Miss Fortescue had received the intelligence coldly, he thought. She had scarcely betrayed the slightest sign of relief; indeed, her manner savoured of complete indifference. Further reflection upon her attitude strengthened the belief

that Eustace's fiancé was very English in the concealment of her strong emotions.

After breakfast Miss Fortescue appeared on the verandah dressed in some filmy white gossamer stuff that added undeniably to her fresh pink-and-white complexion. In sub-tropical countries most Englishwomen develop, sooner or later, a carelessness in regard to their attire, which frequently operates against their immediate social advancement. Not so Miss Cynthia Fortescue. Her appearance was everything to her, even though the hall thermometer registered a hundred degrees of heat. At a time when the stockyard aborigines were panting in the shade of some coolibahs, she was completing a lengthy toilet which had already occupied the greater part of the tropical morning.

Mrs. Prendegast regarded her trim appearance with unfeigned wonder and regret. She gave vent to her feelings the moment Mr. Mason appeared on the verandah.

"It seems to me, sir, that some people consider it becoming to dress for their intended husband's execution. It is little more than an insult to the house of Fitzallan—and especially Eustace!" she declared, acidly.

The minister frowned. "My dear Mrs. Prendegast, there is not going to be an execution," he responded, heartily.

"There's no need for that young lady to be fashioning her hair at a time like this, sir," was the housekeeper's heated response. "I am very careful of my own appearance, Mr. Mason; I

consider it my duty to enhance whatever good looks the Lord has given me. But to spend a whole morning before a glass"—her face paled with indignation—"while my intended husband was lying in the shadow of death—what would you think of me?"

"Tut, tut!" The minister paced the verandah uneasily. "There is hardly need for Miss Fortescue to abandon her womanly privileges. No one desires her to assume sackcloth. And I must again remind you that Eustace is not entirely without hope."

His face belied his cheerful tones, for since the escape of Martin, and the unconscious condition of Trooper Hannan, there seemed little chance of bringing forth sufficient evidence to warrant a fresh trial.

Miss Fortescue had retired to the far end of the verandah, where she appeared to be absorbed in the attempts of a young boundary rider to catch a flat-eared horse in the middle of the yard.

The housekeeper's remarks had not reached her, or if they had, she exhibited no trace of concern. The minister's sympathy for her was not to be shaken because a middle-aged lady objected to her continuance of certain refined habits. Cynthia Fortescue's desire to escape the slovenly customs of bush etiquette and style of dressing appealed to his artistic sensibilities. He had always considered slovenliness in a woman's dress as a sign of mental debility.

Moreover, he did not pretend to understand her

feelings in regard to Eustace. He could not, even as her spiritual adviser, expect her complete confidence in such matters.

It occurred to him that it was his duty now to bring Trooper Hannan's statements forward immediately. Not an instant was to be lost if he desired to see justice done to Eustace. He must keep his head clear on certain points, since it was impossible for Hannan to come forward. He recalled the trooper's statement concerning the size of the service bullet found in Josephs' head, and the improbability of its having been fired by a rifle of the kind used by young Fitzallan.

He returned to the house, and in his feverish excitement explained Hannan's bullet theory to Mrs. Predegast. She listened, and shook her head somewhat dismally when he had finished.

"That's windy kind of evidence, sir," she broke out. "Those larrikin policemen will make their bullet fit a cannon if it suits them. Look at those poor Mount Rennie boys! A bunch of them hanged last year to gratify the newspaper bloodhounds. Only a miracle will save Eustace, or some sudden intervention of Providence!"

Mr. Mason turned again to the verandah and found himself confronted by one of the station hands. The man touched his hat respectfully. "Beg pardon, sir, here's a young woman at the gate asking to see you. Old David's girl, Hetty Bellinger," he concluded, abruptly.

Mrs. Predegast quivered at the announcement, for she viewed with something of Simon's loathing

the presence of a Bellinger even at the homestead gate.

"It's fair indecent of that girl to come here at such a time!" she cried, angrily. "I trust you'll not be inviting her in, sir!" she added, with vehemence.

The minister stayed in the doorway, his face reddening, his lips slightly indrawn. "Miss Bellinger would not send for me without cause, Mrs. Prendegast. While in this house, or any other, I am always at liberty to give advice to my parishioners."

Without another word he walked quickly to the homestead gate, where Hetty was standing with her back to the rail.

She turned at the sound of his steps on the gravel, and he saw that her face had lost its feverishness of the day before. Yet something in her pain-lit eyes evoked an exclamation as he shook hands.

"You are ill!" he declared, earnestly. "I fear that things are not going too well with you, Miss Bellinger. We must be cheerful, though. You have heard of Martin's escape?"

"Yes; that's why I came here." Her voice sounded harsh and weary, as one who had begun to feel the after-shock of her brother's crime. She felt that his eyes were almost seeking to trace her thoughts, knew by the sudden flame spot on his cheeks that he had by some means divined the truth of her brother's unspeakable treachery.

It was some time before she continued, and the blood seemed to go from her face at the sound of

her own voice. "Trooper Hannan arrested my brother for shooting Mr. Josephs," she went on. "I don't know how Hannan arrived at the truth; I thought the secret was between myself and"—she paused to steady herself by the rail—"between myself and Martin," she said at last.

"Then, you knew!" he cried, leaning towards her, "since the moment Eustace was arrested!"

"I was in the gully when Martin fired the shot." She spoke flatly, like one sick unto death. "Now I have come to speak the truth when it is too late."

He shook his head uncertainly. "Does your father know?" he half whispered.

"Yes, but he will not speak. Nothing will make him come forward against his own son to save Eustace Fitzallan."

"And you?"

"I am going to Brisbane to-day. I must see the head of the Police Department or a lawyer, some one who will guide me in the matter," she admitted. "Eustace's innocence must be made clear."

Not for love of gain was she making this tremendous sacrifice, since nothing but calumny would follow the woman who could stand in a court of justice and submit evidence against her brother.

What had she to gain?

Something in her tearless face appealed to him. Only a little while ago, it seemed, he had seen her riding wild-haired and defiant, laughing at Simon's shrewd ways and petty meannesses. To-day he saw how grief had burnt her white, and his heart grew soft as a woman's at sight of her misery.

"If I am judging rightly, Miss Bellinger," he said, in a slightly shaking voice, "you are imposing a terrible duty upon yourself. It is not for me, a minister of Christ, to warn you from that duty, but rather to point the way."

He did not ask what she had seen of the tragedy at Echo Gully. He was certain, above all things, that she knew enough to prove her brother's guilt if she were only permitted a fair hearing. And, although he regretted deeply that Martin could only be brought to justice by his sister's testimony, he felt that the life of Eustace Fitzallan was more precious than that of the skulking young horse-thief.

He turned upon her with a queer look in his face.

"How much money have you?"

She started a little and flushed hotly. "Does it matter if I have none?" she asked, simply. "My father will not help me in this affair; I could not ask him for money to prosecute Martin."

"True. But you cannot go penniless to Brisbane. You will meet enemies—the police, for instance. They will not allow you to tear their evidence to shreds without trying to hurt you in many ways. You must have money." He smote his fist against his palm, as though the word money hurt his sense of decency.

It would be impossible for her to face even the briefest police inquiry without funds or legal assistance. He knew enough of Queensland police methods to feel that they would attempt to suppress her evidence the moment she put it forward on behalf of the condemned man.

A telegram to Sir Julian Keen, the counsel employed by Simon Fitzallan, would clear away difficulties, no doubt. In the first place, however, it was necessary to get Hetty Bellinger safely to Brisbane, and to arrange for her welfare the moment she arrived there.

He explained his scheme at length, while she listened doubtfully almost, shrinking at times at the mention of money whenever it obtruded into his scheme. "An immediate loan of ten pounds will not sever our friendship, Miss Bellinger," he stated, earnestly. "Simon Fitzallan would leap to the rescue with funds, but the merest hint of such a proceeding would prejudice public and legal opinion against us."

"I don't want help from Simon Fitzallan," Hetty retorted, fiercely. "Do you think I am bargaining Eustace's life against my brother's . . . ? Money! I don't want his money or his help!"

"Pray compose yourself, Miss Bellinger. We'll fight it out alone then." In dealing with her he found that he must proceed cautiously. The life of Eustace ought not to be hazarded on a mere girlish whim or question of principle.

He drew a cheque-book from his pocket, filled one up rapidly, folded it, and thrust it into her half-clenched hand.

"Take it and repay me at your leisure. I will ride with you to the station, and shall meet you in the city at an appointed time. But . . . this money you must take."

Hetty consented reluctantly enough to the loan,

and mounted her pony with the cheque in her hand. The moaning of Trooper Hannan reached her as she waited while the minister was being supplied with a horse. The doctor passed them ten minutes later as they rode down the track towards Engandine. Hetty's heart was too full to allow her to look up as he dashed by in his sulky to attend the unconscious trooper.

An inquisitive crowd gathered at the Engandine station as she entered, accompanied by the minister. The news of Martin's arrest and escape had preceded her, and the small parties of bush workers and station hands raised a cheer the moment she took her seat in the train, it being generally assumed that she was journeying to the city to obtain legal assistance and advice for her brother.

With a cheery good-bye the minister watched the train depart, and then handed her pony to the keeping of a young rouseabout, who promised to ride with it as far as the Bellinger selection.

Returning to Wahgunyah station, Mr. Mason passed hastily to his room, with the intention of packing his portmanteau for the morrow's journey. He fancied that the curtains of Miss Fortescue's window fluttered slightly as he stepped by. He was about to halt a moment, but thought better.

Diving into his bedroom he threw off his coat, and was soon collecting the few articles necessary for his stay in the city. A slight footstep on the verandah outside made him look up from his work ; the shadow of Mrs. Prendegast fell across the doorway. She coughed apologetically.

"I must complain, Mr. Mason, of this Bellinger girl's visit to this house. I'm certain that Mr. Fitzallan would not approve of it."

Mrs. Predegast was annoyed at the way he had ridden off with the daughter of David without volunteering the slightest explanation. Mrs. Predegast also resented his impassioned conversation with Hetty at the sliprail. Unable to comprehend the nature of their discourse, his emphatic utterances and gestures, together with the young girl's attitude of brooding acquiescence, her womanly fears had naturally become excited.

"I cannot understand a minister's devotion to such roundabouts. Simon will not be well pleased, sir," she vouchsafed.

"Mr. Fitzallan will approve in the present case, Mrs. Predegast. Please don't worry a man who is shouldering half the spiritual burdens of the district."

He was in his shirt sleeves, thrusting various articles of clothing into his portmanteau. "Mr. Fitzallan," he went on, bluntly, "would approve of the devil himself if he came at such a crisis."

"The devil is nearer to the Bellingers than to most people, Mr. Mason. I'm not forgetting that Miss Hetty was suckled among horse-thieves," was the caustic rejoinder.

He faced her with a grim look on his clear-cut face. "I regret to say that Miss Bellinger's past affects me very little, ma'am. At present I am concerned with the future of Eustace Fitzallan's body; his soul may look after itself for a little

while ; his body's the thing just now, and the hangman is waiting for it. Put away your scruples about horses, and help me with my portmanteau, for the Queensland executioner is a very punctual fellow, Mrs. Prendegast."

The housekeeper retired speedily to her room shocked and scandalised by the minister's unprecedented behaviour.

CHAPTER XV

SIMON FITZALLAN left the court-house with the judge's terrible sentence still beating through his half-dazed mind. It seemed incredible, unthinkable, that his son should be deprived of his life by these thunder-voiced attorneys and unhealthy-looking jurymen. He had expected that a recommendation to mercy would be added, but even this last shred of hope had been denied him.

The eloquence of his counsel had failed to convince the Court of his son's innocence. In an address, lasting nearly two hours, Sir Julian Keen had pleaded for the life of the young Oxonian, setting forth scientific facts to prove that men of his temperament were no more responsible for their actions than the lowest types of aboriginals.

Sir Julian had decided that the plea of accidental death would not hold, in view of Sergeant Deemer's evidence, and he had perforce fallen back upon the argument of the accused's temporary insanity while recovering from an attack of alcoholic poisoning. It was soon apparent that the judge and jury were in no humour for Sir Julian's scientific deductions, and their unanimous verdict of wilful

murder left not the slightest loophole of escape for the prisoner.

And no sane man who had followed the evidence submitted by both counsel could have cried out against the justice of the verdict.

Now that the trial was over, Simon had no inclination to return home. For once in his life he shrank from the immediate future—the days that swept onward towards the fatal morning when his son would be led forth to an unspeakable end.

One night he wandered in the vicinity of the gaol where the police kept guard in the turreted walls, their vigilant eyes turned upon the white-washed buildings below. There came upon him a desire to annihilate these creatures of the Government, who were holding his son at the point of the carbine until the hangman claimed him.

Sitting alone in his room at the hotel that night, a servant entered and announced a visitor who preferred not to give his name.

"Another of those d——d lawyers!" Simon muttered, wearily. "Show him up."

A heavy-shouldered man, dressed in a dark serge coat and pants, was shown in. His pallid face and big overhanging jaw more than hinted at his occupation. Something in his creeping stride struck a chill into the old cattle king. Above all things he feared big men who possessed the cat instinct of moving without sound.

"I take it you're a Government official," he declared, huskily. "What's your business?"

"I'm a friend—a messenger from Mr. Eustace."

His voice was keyed scarcely above a whisper; he looked back over his shoulder with a dog-like glance, as though in dread of an eavesdropper.

"I've got to be cautious, Mr. Fitzallan," he continued, in the same low key. "We never know who's touting or following us up."

"Well, sir." Simon rose from his chair abruptly, and leaned forward. "What can I do for ye?" he asked.

The visitor turned into the passage, listened for several seconds before closing the door. Then, drawing a letter from his pocket, he handed it to the waiting Simon.

It was a note from Eustace, briefly worded, yet each syllable emphasised the inescapable tragedy awaiting him. "My dear Father," it began, "here-with my last regrets for pain and trouble inflicted upon your innocent head. Hitherto I was rather apt to consider myself master of my fate; yet a mere slip of the foot proves me one of Fate's puppets. Let us make the best of it. Like the gentleman dandy of old, my soul jibs at mention of the halter. A spasm of humour has afflicted me of late, and for the life of me I cannot reconcile myself to the Big Trap Door Act that will land me half smiling into eternity. I must be saved from the harlequin business. I pray you, therefore, pater mine, get me one small bottle of chloral that I may escape the horror of judicial strangulation. The bearer of this note is a prison warder. Give him the medicine at once, and enough money to compensate him for his services.

E. F."

Only Eustace could have written that letter ; yet behind its crude levity of style Simon felt the cold fear of his son's despair. He put it aside without looking up at the big, slow-breathing warder standing near the door. Eustace's proposal chilled him to the marrow. His soul shrank from such a bleak and pitiless alternative.

Little by little the sharp edge of the situation pricked and bladed him into thought and action. He sat in his chair, his head almost bowed between his knees, voiceless, his brain a seething pandemonium of warring emotions.

The prison warder appeared to divine the nature of Simon's dilemma ; his feet moved uneasily, then he gestured like one counselling patience and deliberation.

" I've got an hour to wait, Mr. Fitzallan. Don't hurry. It's worth thinking over—this affair."

" Ah ! " Simon inhaled the hot night air as though it were a draught of poison. " Ah ! " He settled himself in his chair, his fists tightly clenched over his knees. Sweat started from his brow, big drops that scoured his cheeks like tears. . . .

Outside the city boomed and muttered. Afar off he heard the voice of the plains calling. There had arisen in his mind the picture of an olive-complexioned boy riding wildly through the native grasses beyond the Maranoa. The sun and wind were rifling the forest of pines, and the joy of being leaped with every movement in the saddle. The picture stayed in Simon's brain until its poignant aftermath drowned his heart in rage and despair.

Small speech was in him as he awoke from his dream of the past to the grim reality of the figure at his elbow, and all that he stood for. . . .

The cries of the city, the sharp, nerve-twisting voices of newsboys, came upon him, screaming their latest horror in evening journalism, the account, no doubt, of his son's career at Oxford to the time of his arrest at Wahgunyah. He rose to the window softly, closed it, and the night seemed to shut down with its burden of heat and the sound of the raucous-voiced men gathered in the billiard-room of the hotel.

The prison warden coughed suggestively. "Three quarters of an hour to get back," he volunteered. "I'll never be able to come again. It's too risky, sir."

The stockbreeder crouched back in his chair, as though seeking shelter from the swart horror which crossed and re-crossed his mind. In the dark ages of history men had been offered the choice of poisoning their sons with the alternative of national calamities, or wholesale slaughter of women and babes. . . . But here was no alternative save the hangman's rope. And the chloral was a sweeter, easier escape. Brain and heart cried against it; the blood of his Calvinistic ancestors ran molten at the thought. Yet it was the only door by which his son might elude the eternal stigma of the gallows.

"Half an hour, sir!" grunted the warden laconically. "Time does fly to be sure."

"Aye, it flies, but not to the man with his soul

in hell fire ! ” Simon raised his head and drew breath wearily, while he again forced himself to the last inevitable act in his son’s career.

“ This medicine,” he said to the warder beside him. “ Eustace says that you will carry it into his cell.”

The warder pondered briefly, shrugged in a non-committal way. “ It’s so risky,” he ventured, like one with a price in view. “ My living goes if I’m caught. I’ve got six children and a sick wife,” this in a pleading tone, calculated to impress the wealthy stockbreeder.

Simon ignited instantly. “ Man, the bairns will be provided for ! If ye fail trying to help my son come to me for the rest of your life.” He pointed west, where the Maranoa lay.

The warder understood, braced himself as though relieved of a burden. “ The bottle to be passed in to your son will be labelled poison. We must take care.”

“ Hush, man ; hundreds of medicine bottles are labelled poison when they’re only sedatives or opiates.”

The warder smiled. “ I know the opiate Mr. Eustace wants, sir. Who’s to blame the lad ? Carson, the bank forger, medicined himself with only eighteen months to serve. Who’d face the gallows when you can go to sleep like a gentleman for eighteenpence ? ”

“ Ye talk like one of Macbeth’s witches,” wailed Simon. “ Hold your tongue and allow me to think.”

The warder turned impatiently. "Time's up, sir." He glanced at his watch, gloomily. "I'm on duty to-night. If you miss this chance I might be shifted, and there'd be no hope of me seeing your son again. The prison deputy changes us about pretty often to check bribery and letter-carrying in and out the gaol."

He moved to the door, his heavy shoulders slouching from side to side. Simon grabbed his sleeve.

"Wait, man, wait ; I'll get the medicine in ten minutes."

Taking his hat from the table, he moved tremblingly into the passage. "Stay here," he commanded. "I'll run to the chemist 'at the street corner."

Down the lamplit road, past idling crowds of women and men he half ran until the familiar gleam of a red lamp caught his eye. Entering the shop he spoke in a thick, hurried voice to an anæmic young assistant standing behind the counter.

"I'm returning to the country," he began ; "and I'm thinking of taking a supply of chloral with me."

"Chloral !" The assistant smiled, deprecatingly. "Very sorry, sir, but we cannot sell it unless you bring a witness. We're liable to a penalty of fifty pounds."

"Where's your employer ?" almost snarled the stockbreeder. "How do bushmen and travellers replenish their medicine chests, d'ye think ? With fever and dysentery on the northern rivers ;

'tis a poor law that keeps men from easing pain and torment ! ”

The chemist's assistant weakened visibly. “ Under those conditions we may be able to supply you. We have to exercise discretion in the sale of certain poisons,” he added. “ The Queensland law is very strict on this point.”

Simon took the small blue phial containing the chloral and returned with leaden steps to the hotel. A certain religious horror moved him at this act of self-destruction on his son's part, but the terror of the scaffold loomed greater than his cold religious promptings.

Eustace was brave in many senses, he was certain, but his artistic nature suffered the last Gehenna of mental torture at the thought of the ignominious death awaiting him. So, with the blue phial in his pocket, the man of a million acres stumbled blindly to the hotel, his brain throbbing at the unspeakable tragedy which had entered his life.

The warder took the bottle from his trembling fingers, smelt the label curiously, and then placed it in a pocket sewn in the lining of his vest.

“ I am trusting you, Mr. Fitzallan. There'll be an inquest for certain, but they'll get nothing out of me.”

He spoke with ponderous good-humour, his great hand straying to his chin, as though something had been left unsaid.

Simon winced. “ You're waiting for your cheque. I'll post it to-morrow. . . . Ye see . . . I'm feeling sick to-night.”

Dropping into his chair, he indicated the door briefly.

The man made no stir. He remained in the centre of the apartment, fingering his chin morosely. "I must have your cheque before I quit here, Mr. Fitzallan. "I've got to blind Warder Thompson to-night. He'll want to see the colour of your money before he passes the medicine through to Mr. Eustace."

"Blind him! What kind of business are ye talking of?"

"Money turns a warder blind, sir. If the sight of your cheque doesn't blind Thompson to-night, this bottle"—he tapped his waistcoat significantly—"goes over the wall into the street."

"And Eustace?" almost groaned the old stockbreeder.

The warder buttoned his serge coat tightly, although the heat of the room was almost unendurable. "The law will take its course, sir. It would be waste of money attempting to bribe the executioner."

He laughed coarsely, but ceased the moment Simon drew out his cheque-book. Slowly, painfully, the old stockbreeder filled in one, and then, with a sick man's gesture, thrust it towards the grinning figure beside him.

"A thousand pounds should blind you and your friend," he exclaimed, wearily. "Good-night!" He sank back gasping in his chair.

The warder departed noiselessly. Simon sat through the night, afraid to lie in his bed, afraid

lest his thoughts might lead to madness and self-destruction. Near daybreak he fell to his knees beside the window and prayed feverishly, incoherently, that the pain and weariness of mind might pass.

The servants awoke him late that morning ; he breakfasted lightly and passed the first hours in an agony of suspense and hopelessness of mind. He closed his ears whenever the sound of a newsboy reached him, as though in dread of the event that would startle the city and bring desolation to his own hearth for evermore.

A few who had seen him at the trial took pains to follow his movements as he tramped up and down the river bank, at the rear of the hotel, starting in an opposite direction whenever a newsboy appeared within sight. He feared these imps of the pavement, their nerve-shattering voices that might at any moment blare forth the tidings of his son's suicide.

Returning to the hotel towards midday, sick from want of rest, he was interrogated in the hall by the manageress, who informed him that a gentleman wished to see him in the reception-room.

The old stockbreeder gestured impatiently, feeling certain that he was about to be interviewed by some loquacious boy-reporter, bent on squeezing the last item of information relating to Eustace's career at Oxford.

Passing the reception-room, he paused, and straightened his bent shoulders at the familiar

voice calling from within. Gerard Mason stepped out, gripping his hand with a force that made the despairing Simon cry out.

"Ye've no right here, Mr. Mason," he exclaimed, pettishly. "Miss Fortescue will be in need of some consolation."

In that moment the minister became a flushed and rather excited figure. Drawing the reluctant Simon into the reception-room, he forced him into a chair, and closed the door.

"Sit here while I talk!" he cried. "The urgency of life and death has brought me here. Prepare yourself, my dear Mr. Fitzallan."

The old cattle king regarded the flushed face and gesticulating figure unmoved. It seemed as though his bruised senses failed to comprehend, or even respond, to this sudden electric discharge. He bent forward in his chair, breathing sharply.

"Go on," he said at last. "I'm a wee bit tired, minister."

The joy of his discovery had uplifted Gerard Mason. No one comprehended better than he how the father of Eustace had walked the dreary paths of shame and despair during the last few days. The joy of revealing the truth of Eustace's innocence moved him to a religious ecstasy. It was only by a supreme effort of will that he refrained from shouting his message to the quailing little man in the chair.

His words fell like hammer-strokes upon Simon. The story of Trooper Hannan's discoveries at

Echo Gully, Martin Bellinger's duplicity and superhuman cunning, were outlined with the skill of a Press reporter. Hetty's sudden testimony, at a moment when all hope of incriminating Martin seemed past, was fairly driven home upon the lethargic stockbreeder. Simon's jaw hung as the whole pitiless story left the minister's lips. His wonderment blazed between joy and fury. A kind of frothing madness seized him—his eyes scintillated, his face became illumined with hatred and joy.

The minister held his hand soothingly. "Let us be calm, Mr. Fitzallan. Perhaps I have been too precipitate with the news. Still, it is better to know that——"

"Oh, your voice gets me!" was the jerked-out retort. "Why did ye not come before? . . . This babble will not save him now. Ye might have wired last night, instead of crawling to me in that tin-pot train. Ye've brought news that might have saved the lad, but ye've brought it too late!"

The minister recoiled from the quivering, excited figure, the clawing fingers, and frothing lips. In another moment Simon had burst past him in his effort to gain the hotel corridor. The minister caught him quickly, holding him in a grip that revealed his strength and friendship.

"We shall never move justice in this fashion, Simon Fitzallan. Let us consult Sir Julian Keen, or we shall only succeed in arousing the suspicions of the Crown Law Department."

Simon wrenched himself from the minister's grip, and half ran along the hotel passage. "Come, come to the gaol with me!" he shouted back. "Help me to gain admittance. Your cloth is of some service, after all. Eustace, for aught I know, is dead!"

CHAPTER XVI

GERARD MASON was never likely to forget his pursuit of the half-demented stockbreeder. But mad or sane, he noted that Simon ran by the shortest route to the gaol. People stared after the lean, sunburnt figure, with the flying coat-tails and the loose shirt-front. The young minister panted in his wake, each stride bringing him nearer his fast-tiring friend.

A small crowd joined the chase until the minister caught up with the exhausted stockbreeder, and gripped his shoulder fast. Satisfied that Simon was either a harmless lunatic or spiritual fanatic, the crowd dispersed good-humouredly.

Very near to anger, the minister addressed his dishevelled friend, and again pointed out the folly of his rash conduct.

Simon grew calm under his biting admonition, and promised to act rationally if he would accompany him to the gaol gates. The minister assented readily enough, and together they walked swiftly in the direction of the prison.

Arriving at the gates, a swarthy official barred further progress with the intimation that certain formalities would have to be observed before admission was gained.

Simon strove to master the savage impatience that goaded him to distraction. "I'll ask ye one question," he exclaimed, passionately. "Is my son Eustace still alive?"

The official stared incredulously at the wild-eyed visitor, and the brutal retort on his lips changed to a more polite rejoinder at sight of Mr. Mason.

"The prisoner Fitzallan was well an hour ago," he said, gruffly, "if that's what you came for."

Simon drew the minister aside and made his appeal in a voice grown husky with suspense. "This barbarian"—he indicated the sullen-browed official in the doorway—"will not deny you a visit to Eustace if ye demand it as your right."

"I'll go in at once, Mr. Fitzallan. According to the Queensland gaol regulations I am entitled to see any prisoner on application."

Simon pondered; the message he desired to send would sound a trifle mysterious, but there was no time for explanations. At any moment his son, goaded to the limits of self-restraint by the near approach of his execution, might resort to the chloral as a means of escaping the law's dread penalty.

"Tell Eustace to leave the bottle alone. Tell him as much as they'll let ye about Martin Bellinger's tricks, and the new trial I'm going to demand."

Mr. Mason stared blankly. "This bottle?" he questioned. "Surely the gaol authorities have not permitted you to send a bottle of any kind to a condemned man."

"I'll explain it all later," Simon hastened to

say. "It's a favour I'm asking, one that will prevent Eustace committing a rash and unholy act. No questions, sir." He held up his finger almost threateningly. "Ye'll do it for me, or we part ways at this gaol gate."

Something in Simon's manner made clear the dreadful extremities to which Eustace had been driven. For some moments the minister remained silent, his face averted as though to hide the quick tears that glistened on his cheek.

"God alone is the final judge in such cases," he whispered. Stepping towards the gaol gate he was admitted, after a few short words of explanation to the swarthy official in attendance.

Simon walked some distance from the prison, but was immediately awakened from his brooding fit by the minister's appearance on the gaol steps. He beckoned Simon hurriedly.

"You will be allowed to accompany me," he said. "I have just obtained permission from the deputy-governor. You may now communicate your wishes to Eustace, I presume, without interference."

Together they entered the gaol and passed down a wide stone corridor that led to the right wing of the prison. After a long wait in an antechamber they were conducted into a long room divided by two heavily wired screens. Between these screens sat a bareheaded constable; behind the second partition, clad in prison garb, stood Eustace. He appeared to have improved since the trial. His eyes were clearer and sparkled with strange

good humour as he nodded to his father and the minister. Simon palpitated visibly, scarce able to control the pent-up thoughts that cried for utterance. "Eustace," he began, quickly, "I implore you to keep your head for once in your life. There's going to be a new trial. The whole thing is a dastardly miscarriage of justice. We have proof positive of your innocence!"

The constable in charge of the interview rose, bristling with indignation. "I warn you that such talk is against the regulations. You must not repeat what you have just said," he commanded, sternly.

"The devil take your regulations," Simon retorted, fiercely. "I repeat that my son will have a new trial. I will prove his innocence to the bleating gang of man-hunters who worked up the case!"

Two senior constables entered the apartment hastily, and Simon felt himself hurried without apologies into the street.

"I've a good mind to order your arrest, Mr. Fitzallan," the elder constable declared. "I shall inform the deputy of your breach of the regulations."

"Pray consider his feelings," pleaded the minister. "There is no doubt whatever concerning the truth of his statements. I myself will vouch for them."

"We are not here to answer for young Fitzallan's guilt or innocence," was the sharp response. "You will leave the prison at once."

"I'll be leaving it shortly in my son's company," Simon affirmed, his blood kindling at the manner of his ejection.

In the street he walked with a firmer step, his mind at ease since Eustace would now rest patiently until a fresh trial had been arranged.

Instinctively both men bent their steps in the direction of Sir Julian Keen's office, for Simon was aware that the Executive Committee would have to be notified before a new trial could be sanctioned.

Sir Julian had not put in his afternoon appearance when they arrived. It was past three o'clock, and his non-arrival caused the old stockbreeder a fresh outburst of annoyance, restrained only by the minister's appeal to his common sense and judgment.

"Common fiddlesticks!" retorted the father of Eustace as he paced Sir Julian's elegantly appointed waiting-room. "The men who prosecute us are always on time. Whoever heard of the absence of a prosecuting counsel!"

Sir Julian appeared half an hour later. His manner was dignified and restrained; even Simon's ferocious impatience failed to disturb him. Beckoning them into his private office, he appealed to Mr. Mason to state the condition of affairs.

Very briefly the minister outlined the series of events which had culminated in the arrest of Martin Bellinger on a charge of shooting Mr. Barney Josephs. Nothing was omitted. The finding of the stray bullet, its size and pattern as compared

with the one in the possession of the police was flashed upon the listening Q.C.

Sir Julian was versed in the intricate ways of native trackers, and the value of evidence adduced from their sound observations and instinctive reasonings. He saw at once that Trooper Hannan had, with the assistance of his black boy, broken the incriminating chain of evidence brought forward by Sergeant Deemer, evidence which he himself had failed to set aside. If the bullet in the possession of the police was incapable of being fired from the rifle found in the river—the Fitzallan rifle—then the whole fabric of assumptions which had convicted Eustace would be swept away. To have missed so vital a point at the trial was humiliating enough to Sir Julian Keen, but not for a moment did he allow his feelings to interfere with his activities in claiming a fresh trial for the condemned Eustace.

The unexpected entry of Hetty Bellinger into the case stimulated the Q.C., and brought a rapid fire of questions from him. What kind of a character did she bear in the district? Was she honest and above suspicion? What was her guiding motive in trying to save Eustace and destroy her brother? What manner of a woman was this, who violated family ties and instincts—to serve her ends? Sir Julian's lips tightened, as he volleyed forth his questions, and waited for his visitors to answer him.

Simon flushed under his sun-tan, plucked at his beard, in evident confusion. "To be frank with

ye, Sir Julian, she's the daughter of a cattle-thieving neighbour of mine. I'm not relying too much on her evidence ; the jade is not to be reckoned with."

"Her testimony spells life or death for your son," was the Q.C.'s unruffled answer. "Make up your mind about her, Mr. Fitzallan. Her evidence is going to smash up Deemer's case. What troubles me is her motive. Some powerful incentive is at work, or she would never implicate her brother."

Simon snapped his fingers impatiently. "Money, money!" he exclaimed, "or my son's affections. What else would drive the jade!"

The minister turned upon him angrily, yet not without a certain grave dignity.

"Do you think that all women are driven to speak the truth to gain some one's purse-strings or the love of a man? For shame, sir! Let us be thankful that the desire for truth and justice is deep rooted in woman's heart, or your son would now be at the mercy of the public executioner."

"Tut, tut!" Simon writhed under the minister's words. "I'll admit to a little over-hastiness," he confessed. "The Bellingers have led me a pretty dance in the past, ye'll admit that, Mr. Mason."

Sir Julian interrupted with a gesture of dissent.

"We must arrange an interview with this young lady," he said. "She has come to Brisbane to submit her evidence voluntarily, it seems. Still, it were better that I should see her. The situation is too serious to permit of quibbling," this with a

glance at Simon. "You have no objection, I hope, Mr. Fitzallan?"

Simon shuffled his feet uneasily. "Mr. Mason must arrange the interview. I cannot bring myself to be on civil terms with the daughter of an old cattle-thief, Sir Julian. I'll willingly pay her for any——"

The Q.C.'s uplifted finger stayed further utterance. "Bribery and corruption, my dear sir. Pray restrain your generosity in the present instance," he protested. "We must treat Miss Bellinger as a free and independent personage. Like Cæsar's wife, she must be above suspicion."

Mr. Mason volunteered to produce Hetty within an hour. Since coming to Brisbane she had gone to live with an elderly lady, one of his old parishioners, at a place called New Farm, on the outskirts of the city. There would be no trouble in finding her.

He departed in a cab from the office, where Simon promised to await his return in one of the adjoining rooms. During the minister's absence Sir Julian seized the opportunity to lecture his wealthy client on the folly of maintaining a hostile attitude towards a valuable witness. Even a life-long feud might well be put aside, he argued, for upon Hetty's evidence rested the frail and disconnected story of the real tragedy.

Simon listened with a show of impatience, yet he was hardly the man to allow a personal grievance to send his son to the gallows. His pent-up bitterness evaporated under Sir Julian's brisk homily,

and with the thought of Eustace's enhanced prospects to comfort him, he retired with muttered apologies to await the coming of Hetty and the minister.

It seemed ages before the cab returned. At sound of their footsteps in the passage Simon edged close to the door, peeped somewhat craftily through the chink, and drew back swiftly as the daughter of David passed on her way to Sir Julian's sanctum.

In his brief glance he noted the change in her alert carriage. Her step was not so firm as it had been a month before. It was the pain in her eyes that touched him most. The sun-tan on her cheeks that often resembled burnt gold was pearl grey, the cheeks were drawn, and showing traces of grief. Yet this inburnt grief had merely bitten new tones into her strange beauty, had chastened and completed her womanhood.

The minister escorted her into Sir Julian's room, where he introduced her with quiet dignity to the expectant Q.C.

Sir Julian wasted not a moment in formalities, but led his fair visitor gently and courteously to the matter in hand. Hetty repeated in an unfaltering voice the story of her brother's duplicity, the almost Machiavellian cunning displayed at Echo Gully at the moment of Eustace's unlucky rifle discharge.

Sir Julian listened with a certain stoicism of manner, as she unfolded her story, making occasional notes on a memorandum at his elbow. When she had finished he sat back stiff-lipped in his

chair, his eyes half closed. His first question came like a thunderclap to the minister, a question that to him seemed ill timed and somewhat out of taste.

Leaning forward in his chair, the Q.C.'s grey eyes became soft and persuasive, while his voice, although gentle and winning, held a certain blade-edge flexibility capable of wounding or caressing, as the occasion warranted.

"Miss Bellinger, were you ever in love with Eustace Fitzallan?" he asked.

A stain of crimson showed on her cheeks and throat. Her lips tightened, and then grew tremulous.

His forefinger tapped the desk, and the sound vibrated and jarred like an electric message.

"Miss Bellinger!" His voice had grown acute, a challenge almost. Then he smiled paternally.

"Yes," she answered; "I loved Eustace Fitzallan."

Sir Julian breathed after the manner of a dentist who had extracted a doubtful tooth. His serenity was slightly disturbed.

"The question will be asked in court, and I'm afraid that you must be prepared to answer it, Miss Bellinger."

"Has it any bearing on the case?" questioned the minister, anxious to spare her unnecessary humiliation.

"Upon that question may depend the verdict of the jury," Sir Julian replied. "It is better that Miss Bellinger should understand an opposing

counsel's method of attack before entering the witness-box. I regret having put my question so deliberately," he added, with a note of apology in his voice.

A further cross-examination of David's daughter proved to the astute Q.C. that her position as a witness was wellnigh unassailable. Whichever way he twisted and probed he discovered nothing that suggested any personal bias in her conduct. If her evidence rescued Eustace from the scaffold it would bring her small relief, since the woman he had chosen for his wife was already awaiting him in his father's house. He did not lose sight of the fact that a woman of Hetty's temperament would never brand her brother a murderer unless moved by some deep religious or spiritual motive.

What had she to gain? If her evidence brought about Eustace's acquittal her brother in all probability would take his place. Eustace would marry Miss Fortescue, and spend the rest of his days feeling grateful to this young bush-girl who had rescued him from an ignominious fate.

Hetty Bellinger would return to her old life on her father's selection, despised by every woman in the district, while her brother was being hunted from place to place by black trackers and mounted police.

It was not Sir Julian's business to warn her against her course of action. If she desired to speak the truth he would see that nothing stood in her way.

Simon, in the adjoining room, caught, from time

to time, some hint of their talk, and marvelled inwardly that the daughter of his lifelong enemy should step in to save his son. His thoughts went out to the young English lady waiting patiently at his station homestead for the return of Eustace. Once out of prison he was determined that his son should marry immediately the daughter of Captain Fortescue. She was not a good match from a financial point of view, but there were compensations in the fact that her very presence would grace his homestead. She had manners and breeding, and was a better type of womanhood than hundreds of the flighty rich girls descended from the old colonial families. The thought of her bibulous father disconcerted him somewhat. Yet there was little to fear so long as the impecunious half-pay captain remained in England.

He was shaken from his dreams by the sound of Mr. Mason's voice in the passage outside. Hetty walked beside him into the street, where the cab waited. Simon rose, and turned into the passage, as though to follow and question her.

Sir Julian appeared at the door of his sanctum, holding up a warning hand. "You must not interrogate Miss Bellinger," he said, quickly. "You must not see or question her at any time during the coming trial."

The old stockbreeder was fumbling with his cheque-book nervously. The astute Q.C. appeared to divine what was in his mind, and drew him gently into his office.

"No cheques to witnesses in my establishment,

Mr. Fitzallan. Do you want to supply the Crown Law Department with matter for a conspiracy charge? Money to a witness!" he cried, with rising heat. "You would only be tightening the noose around the neck of your son."

CHAPTER XVII

To the girl who had been nurtured within the sweet airs of the Maranoa the atmosphere of the courthouse seemed poisonous and fœtid. It was as though she had been thrust suddenly into a menagerie of struggling humans, all eager to look upon the woman whose testimony had moved the Executive Committee to grant a new trial to the young man lying under sentence of death.

The sound of her name called out by the officer standing in the passage struck her with a deadly sickness, for in the tense silence which followed she caught the sullen mutter of voices that changed to harsh whisperings the moment she entered the court.

She was conscious only of Sir Julian's voice, kindly and reassuring amid the buzzing of suppressed tongues. And as she turned to enter the witness-box her eyes fell naturally upon Eustace in the dock. Instinctively he responded to her glance. Sharp wonder at her presence stirred him almost to speech.

And in that moment it came to her that his life was in her hands. The thought filled her with a sweet, savage pain, a pain that some women

feel when they part for ever with a well-beloved child.

It was hers to take him from the shadow and give him back to life, to the freedom of the beautiful earth and his native Maranoa. And between the buzzing voices and the beating of her heart she heard the throb of the desolation that would henceforth be hers. She saw herself drifting into old age, remembered only as the woman who had betrayed her brother to save the son of a squatter king.

There were men in the court who breathed sharply at the unexpected beauty of her face and form. She had come into that criminal arena like a hurt thing from the forest, her wounded eyes seeking to trace, here and there, some qualities of mercy or pity in the stern-visaged lawyers around her.

Sir Julian's voice recalled her to the dreaded ordeal which had haunted her for days. Gently, suavely, he led her back to the scene of Echo Gully, while in the simplest phraseology she was made to unfold the story of the crime committed by her brother Martin.

A deadly silence held the court ; the faces which had smiled tenderly at her some minutes before grew dark with mistrust and suspicion the moment her brother was implicated in the crime. Eustace awoke from his brooding, his shoulders straightened involuntarily when he heard how skilfully Martin had tricked him.

The Court appeared electrified by her disclosures, but there were many who declared that the truth

of her statements would be severely tested the moment she faced the prosecuting counsel.

The crucial moment arrived on the second day of the trial. Contrary to expectations, the attacking counsel treated her during the initial stages of her cross-examination with inimitable politeness. His attitude of good-humoured toleration gradually crystallised into one of cynical contempt. With permissible effrontery he assailed her from an unexpected quarter.

"Your father, Miss Bellinger, is connected with the cattle trade," he said, after a lengthy fusillade of seemingly irrelevant questions.

"All my people are connected with cattle," she admitted, humbly.

A soft titter from the back benches greeted her reply.

The counsel smiled shrewdly as he leaned towards the death-white girl in the box.

"The police were frequent visitors to your cottage," he continued, more raucously. "Will you inform the Court of the nature of their visits?"

"They came after cattle we were supposed to have stolen—Mr. Fitzallan's cattle," was the unexpected answer.

The prosecuting counsel adjusted his cravat with undue elaboration, smiled innocently, and flung out his next question with almost brutal suddenness.

"Were you ever in love with the prisoner, Miss Bellinger? Did he ever kiss you—for instance?"

"Yes," from the white-lipped girl.

Silence followed.

"And you have no desire to see the prisoner suffer the last penalty of the law, Miss Bellinger?"

"No."

"Your brother Martin was not on good terms with you? You quarrelled frequently?"

"Not frequently; only twice in our lives."

"Are you afraid of your brother Martin? Would you rather he went away or disappeared, for ever, say?"

"No."

"He struck you upon one occasion. Your father had to separate you?"

"Yes, he struck me. I had accused him of shooting Mr. Josephs."

The prosecuting counsel dismissed her with ill-concealed impatience, and began a pitiless review of her family history that lasted nearly an hour. Simon Fitzallan almost crouched in his seat watching the face of the cold-eyed judge. No one knew better than he how the minds of the jury had been coloured by certain newspaper reports concerning the unreliability of Miss Bellinger as a witness. And it was not until the appearance of Mr. Mason in the box that her testimony gained its full significance.

The minister entered the box and related his experience with Trooper Hannan at Echo Gully. He spoke of the bullet found in the tree above Josephs' head, of Martin's tracks that led to and from the spot, facts which supported Hetty's statement, and appeared to clear whatever doubts lingered in the minds of the jury.

At the request of Sir Julian Keen, the rifle which Eustace had used was again produced. A Government ammunition expert was called in, and after an exhaustive survey of the weapon he declared that the old service bullet, in the possession of the police, could not have been fired from such a modern rifle.

Hereat Sir Julian rose, and in scathing terms denounced the methods of conviction adopted by the Police Department. The history of colonial jurisdiction was tainted with similar worked-up cases, he declared boldly. His client had been the victim of unscrupulous Press comments from the very beginning. Justice was an excellent thing for rich and poor alike, but he failed to see why his client should be made to suffer through an unparalleled blunder committed by a certain officer of the mounted police.

Miss Bellinger, he pointed out, may have conceived an attachment for Mr. Eustace Fitzallan during their childhood, but there was abundant testimony to prove that she had nothing to gain by the prisoner's acquittal except the knowledge that he would return to freedom to fulfil a promise of marriage to another young lady.

He impressed these facts upon the jury with a note of genuine passion in his voice. What had she gained by coming forward? he demanded. Surely no Christian woman would seek to destroy her brother under such circumstances. He begged them to consider the evidence submitted voluntarily by Mr. Mason. No one could say that the

reverend gentleman was conspiring to defeat the ends of justice. If, however, the jury decided to set aside the testimony of Miss Bellinger and Mr. Mason, he would like the evidence for the prosecution to explain how a man could be guilty of firing a bullet which the Government expert declared could not possibly have fitted into the magazine of his rifle.

Sir Julian sat down amid a profound silence broken only by the sharp breathing of the crowded court.

The judge's summing-up was pithy and full of judicial restraint. In the absence of the alleged culprit, Martin Bullinger, it was difficult to go on with the case. He was of opinion, however, that Miss Bellinger's evidence was sane and in no way exceeded the bounds of probability. The jury must accept her unshaken testimony in a spirit of fairness and in all good faith, for he could not conceive any woman coming forward unsolicited to swear away the life of her brother!

Between the jury's retirement and their comparatively swift return to the court Simon Fitzallan lived through the last Gehenna of fear and hope. Once or twice he turned to Eustace in the dock, only to find his eyes averted. The atmosphere of the court-house almost stifled him; the minutes reeled into eternities, while his brain throbbed and his heart shook with returning fear.

A door clicked near the passage, the jury entered in a body, and through the leaping chaos of light

and sound he caught the words "Not guilty," spoken in clear, incisive tones.

Simon sat very still for several seconds, scarce daring to breathe. He was conscious of the minister's hand on his shoulder shaking him violently. "Come outside," the voice said. "The devil has suffered a reverse, Mr. Fitzallan. We have smitten him hip and thigh."

The old stockbreeder staggered with him through the press of shapes in the evil-smelling corridor. Men stared at him, and several thrust out rough, sun-browed fists to congratulate him on his son's acquittal.

"Where's Eustace?" he panted. "There will be no more wretched formalities, I hope. Where's my son?"

They waited in one of the outer rooms adjoining the court-house, where an official bade them remain until Eustace joined them. Simon paced the room wolfishly, angrily it seemed; up and down he tramped, pausing at every step in the corridor outside, ignoring the soft-voiced minister at his elbow.

The moments of suspense terminated pleasantly. A familar footstep echoed down the stone passage; very quietly Eustace entered the room, smiling a little, although the last moments of the trial had tested his powers of resistance to the snapping point. It seemed unfitting that father and son should openly express joy and exultation under the roof of the court-house, where both had tasted the bitterness of death. Simon merely gripped

his hand and held it fiercely. Mr. Mason was not to be denied, however, and succeeded in pressing his congratulations on the young Oxonian.

"Home, home!" he broke in, cheerfully. "This air is poisonous. Let us go back to our native gum-trees."

Sir Julian crushed into the room hurriedly and shook hands with Simon and his son. "We ought not to forget Miss Bellinger," he said, after having expressed his good wishes to both. "All the Queen's Counsels and attorneys would have been as cheese before the knife only for her evidence. I have examined scores of women in my day," he went on, warmly, "and I have discovered the implacable qualities of truth, when it is bastioned within a woman's conscience."

The inevitable crowd waited outside the courthouse to greet Eustace as he walked down the steps. His acquittal, in spite of the previous Press demonstrations against him, was regarded by those present at the trial as a brief and happy piece of colonial justice.

Sir Julian parted with them in the street, where a carriage stood ready to bear them to Simon's hotel. The blood came into Eustace's cheeks, his eyes sparkled nimbly at the sudden return to freedom and the good things of life.

Dinner awaited them in one of the private rooms of the hotel, and the whirl of the punkahs over the glass and silver-burdened tables dispelled the last breath of gaol atmosphere from the young man's mind.

Simon's exhilaration manifested itself in various ways. He pressed food and wine upon his son, assuming at times a sternness of manner that barely concealed his bubbling spirits.

Eustace ate sparingly of the delicacies placed before him. The wine he pushed aside, preferring a draught of iced water from the carafe at his elbow.

"A good beginning," laughed Simon, indicating the sparkling water in the glass. "But I must ask you, as a favour, my boy, to drink the health of a certain young lady from England."

Eustace put down his glass suddenly, and the minister noted that his face had lost its colour.

Simon was too full of his theme to follow the effects of his words. "Ye'll drink to the health of Cynthia Fortescue, Eustace." He rose, holding his champagne glass in the air, and delivered a short oration on the tender and sympathetic qualities of the young lady who had braved the perils of the sea to join his son in Queensland. Young ladies of refined manners were scarce enough in the country, and he trusted that Eustace would begin a new life by marrying the daughter of Captain Fortescue at the earliest date.

Eustace, after the first shock of surprise, appeared to brighten at the conclusion of his father's address. The minister stared blankly at the wine card in front of him.

"I'm not goading ye to marry any woman, Eustace," Simon went on, his manner hardening perceptibly. "No man has a right to talk fast

and loose with a young lady on a question of marriage. Ye promised her or ye didn't."

"Swore is the proper word, pater. Your mere man promises. I did the thing correctly and on my knees."

"By Heaven, she's worth it!" Simon exclaimed, vehemently. "The time was when I'd have propped to anything half so fine, my lad. Your mother was a good woman, Eustace. She could do her sixty miles on horseback without turning a feather. Still, there are other kinds of good women," he added, warmly.

The health of Miss Fortescue was drunk.

The wine had reached Simon. The goblin shadow of the hangman had been with him for many nights, and now in the sloth of after dinner, the very muscles of his heart and brain seemed to cry for mirth and good fellowship.

The minister continued staring at his wine card, bleakly, Eustace thought. Something was going to be said after his father retired; he could feel it in the air. In drinking the health of Miss Fortescue, Mr. Mason had merely touched the glass with his lips.

Simon prattled on. There was no denying his sudden mental activity. Relieved from the blighting uncertainty which had threatened to engulf him, he turned naturally upon the wellbeing of his son's future.

After the meal, however, a sudden weariness came upon him. He was compelled to retire to his room to gain a few hours' sleep before proceeding by train to Engandine.

Mr. Mason remained in the smoking-room, and was soon joined by Eustace, who appeared reluctant to leave a place where the scent of good cigars and the voices of men floated around. He had felt the squeeze of the prison cell, and his body and mind craved for immediate comradeship.

He looked forward with a new joy to the coming years, although his philosophy of life had been somewhat shaken by his recent experiences. Fate had stalked him to the foot of the gallows, had permitted him, in his twenty-first year, to taste of prison broth, to hear, in the grey dawn, the thud, thud of nails being driven into the cross-beam that darkened the triangular space of the separate depot yard.

Mr. Mason broke upon his thoughts abruptly. He had been contemplating the young Oxonian through a vista of cigar smoke with growing curiosity.

"The coming of Miss Fortescue has been an unusual event," he began, in his clear voice. "No one was more electrified than your father."

"He has been so busy saving me from being hanged that he hasn't had time to think," Eustace volunteered. "To tell you the truth, I wasn't quite expecting her."

"You sent her some of the cash you borrowed from Josephs?" The minister was not anxious to play the spiritual adviser to his young friend, but he regarded it as his Christian duty to act on behalf of the young lady, who, as far as he knew, was without money or friends.

Eustace lipped his cigar with epicurean gusto, his head thrown back, watching the smoke-wreaths marbling the air above. "Josephs' money, yes," he drawled. "Blood money, eh, Mason?"

The minister winced. Eustace's manner was free from affectation or insincerity. His peculiar ill-luck had tempered his soft, easy-going nature. "I sent the cheque to Cynthia's father because he's so jolly hard up nine days out of ten. Decent sort in his way, but inclined to tap whenever the bright edge of a coin was visible. I sent the money from Naples, in response to an urgent wire."

"It was agreed then that Cynthia was to come out to you?"

"Quite. Didn't think old Bob, beg pardon, Captain Fortescue, would rush the girl at me first steamer, though."

Eustace sat up stiffly and yawned. "Of course, I shall do the thing, Mason, my boy. And if Cynthia Fortescue is willing, I shall place the third and last chapter of my life in her sweet keeping."

"You reassure me, Eustace. Yet we blame you for keeping your engagement a secret. It was unjust to Miss Fortescue. Of course, as you say, her father is something of a gentleman?"

"We backed the same horses, Mason. Yes, old Forty is quite the correct thing."

"Eustace!"

The young Oxonian laughed mirthlessly. "Yes, we backed the same horses, and we always lost. You see I had been studying pretty hard when I met old Forty; I had been smelling more of the

lamp than was good for me. And when I broke away from my books I was hardly fit to meet a woman so primed in the arts and graces, and accomplished as a thrush in spring."

"I know she sings," admitted the other, innocently. "A charming creature surely."

"Of course she is. And that's where the trouble came in, Mason. Forty took an awful lot of trouble to bring us together. Used to wait for me outside Magdalen with a hired carriage. Being an army man, he was keyed up to all our games, and took a big interest in my cricket."

"They always do," sighed the minister.

"Well, Cynthia's here anyhow, Mason; but between ourselves I don't think she wanted to come. Ask yourself, now, would any young English lady suffer that unholy voyage to marry a mere man? If I'd been a duke or attached to the viceregal crowd, one might have expected a female dash for the coronet."

"You think she came under pressure?"

"Forty was the boy to do the pressing," laughed Eustace. "Still, I'm glad you all like her. I thought the pater might throw some of his cows at me if he heard of my engagement. What with the Josephs affair I postponed telling him until she told him herself. He took it like a lamb, God bless him!"

The minister sighed and shook his head. "Things do not always run as we would like," he said, after a breath-giving pause. "I have to confess to a certain mishap brought about by the mailman at

Wahgunyah. He threw a wretched newspaper on the verandah, and, of course, Miss Fortescue opened it."

Eustace wriggled. "Saw some of those pen sketches the newspaper artists made of me, eh? They generally give a man a bashed nose and an outstanding jaw if he is being tried for his life. What did she say, Mason?"

"It wasn't a picture of you, it was an account of the trial with some references to your performances at Oxford. She——"

"Broke up?"

"Ye-e-s, rather. Of course it's all over now, and we can laugh at the newspapers that tried to prejudice public opinion." The minister stroked his face thoughtfully. "It was a very nasty business for your father and Miss Fortescue."

"Yes, but I defy the Fates to keep up my run of bad luck," declared the other. "After my experiences I feel capable of licking the devil himself."

"My dear Eustace, you were merely a pawn in the game. A woman moved and saved you," the minister said frankly. "A woman was your life and your resurrection."

"Bravo, Mason; you saved that bit for me, I'll warrant. I saw it in your eye at dinner."

"You are cynical, my friend. Take care, take care."

"I walk in fear and trembling, sir. A month from to-day I shall be married; the ceremony will be performed by your inimitable self. What is your fee, Mason?"

"I repeat, you are cynical, Eustace. You formed a marriage contract with Miss Fortescue because old Forty, as you call him, praised your cricket score and flattered your self-esteem. Am I right ? "

"Are men of your calling ever wrong ? " was the evasive reply.

The minister shook his head dejectedly. Glancing at his watch, he rose to leave the room, and stood hesitating in the doorway.

Eustace yawned and half rose. "By the way, I did not see Het Bellinger when we left the court-house. I suppose you have her Brisbane address, Mason ? " he inquired, casually.

The minister's face clouded. "Yes ; I have Miss Bellinger's address. I'm afraid I can't give it to you though."

"Did she tell you to keep it from me ? "

"Yes ; I must respect her wishes in this matter."

Eustace sat down again. "I thought the pater might like to thank her personally. Does she intend returning to her home ? "

"No. She will earn her living in the city. I have talked the matter over with Miss Bellinger, and she agrees with me that it would be unwise to return to the Maranoa. A situation will be obtained for her, and there is no need why she should not be very happy."

Eustace laughed strangely. "A woman risks her reputation to save the son of a millionaire, gives up her home because she dare not go back to it, and in return somebody presents her with

a situation—a job, probably, in a laundry or a gentleman's house. Great Scott, it's enough to shame the face of a workhouse keeper."

"My dear Eustace, we cannot offer money or its equivalent to Miss Bellinger. She is prepared to abide by the result of her actions. Knowing you were innocent, and—and feeling for you as she did, she could not allow them to hang you. I consider her conduct eminently sane and just. There never was any thought of compensation. Personally, I should regard any mention of such a thing as highly improper."

"The Church speaketh, the Church praiseth, and then offereth the martyr a situation." Eustace laughed sullenly this time, and consoled himself with a second cigar.

The minister, without responding, retired to his room to prepare for the long journey to Engandine.



CHAPTER XVIII

THE train journey to Engandine lasted seven hours. A crowd of Wahgunyah cattlemen assembled at the station to congratulate Eustace on his return. Throughout the trial much sympathy had been expressed by the men who had known him since childhood. Several squatters came forward openly to thank Providence that neighbour Fitzallan had cheated a pernicious police system of one innocent victim at least.

Simon in his heart detested the ceremony of speechmaking, but in the present instance he was compelled to respond to the clamour of the heterogeneous crowd. A four-horse drag had been requisitioned by the Mayor of Engandine, and with Eustace and Simon installed on the box-seat, a triumphant procession followed them to the outskirts of the township. Here, after many handshakes, father and son, in company with Mr. Mason, were permitted to return to their home.

Once clear of the crowd, Simon assumed an easier attitude. His heart was gladdened at sight of the moist earth, which indicated a recent downfall of rain. Here and there along the track the scarlet cassia-trumpets blazed from the over-

hanging shelves of rock. The air was still hot and moist ; bands of wind-driven clouds raced up from the east, threatening even a more copious fall of rain.

With a brown forefinger the old cattle king indicated a beautiful pine-covered slope that stood well inside the Wahgunyah boundary. It was shut in from the road by a natural growth of palm scrub and interwoven vines. As far as the eye could reach the land fell and rose in grassy undulations.

"A site for a young couple to settle on, Mr. Mason. A good stone house, eh, and none of your flimsy weatherboards ? How many men would give twenty years' service for a slice of it ? "

The minister sighed.

"I remember the time," Simon continued, "when all the land hereabouts lay crying for an owner. Bill Hammersly was four weeks behind me in his dray the day I selected Wahgunyah. He took all the west side of the river ; I put my hand along the east. To-day, Bill Hammersly can draw up a cheque for six figures, while I'm fairly reliable in the direction of a million."

Eustace writhed inwardly, suppressing with difficulty a question that rose on his lips. He knew his father had played the land buccaneer upon more than one occasion, a business that reeked of petty philanderings, open lying, and treachery. Even in his day he had seen the game fought out with pitiless barbarity. He had observed a new settler come into the district full of hope and courage,

and possessing enough capital to tide him over the first few years. The man would acquire several hundreds of acres of thickly timbered land adjoining one of his father's boundaries. For months the newcomer would slave with untiring energy, clearing his land of the giant trees and tenacious undergrowth. A year would pass before the land was ready for the plough. Then drought or fire would sweep away everything, leaving the newcomer penniless.

Simon usually stepped in with an offer of work to the burnt-out selector. The offer was usually accepted, and the land which had cost the heart's blood of one pioneer was afterwards acquired for a few pounds, sometimes shillings. Simon had never missed an opportunity of buying out a ruined farmer. Other squatters had done the same; and it seemed to Eustace as though their fences were crimsoned with the blood of Australia's pioneers.

Nearing home, a crowd of coatless station hands met Simon, for the news of Eustace's acquittal had been flashed throughout Queensland. Big sun-scorched men capered like boys in front of the drag, shouting, vociferating their welcome as the minister and Eustace descended near the homestead gate.

Simon begged the men not to make asses of themselves. He also inferred that a sudden fall in wages would eventuate if certain persons failed to control their juvenile exuberance. His sub-humorous threat lost force the moment Eustace touched ground. Four giants from the yard lifted

him shoulder high, while Mrs. Prendegast brought up the rear, wiping her eyes as they bore him to the men's quarters.

"This skiting nonsense is merely beer-froth!" Simon complained. "It fair rots a man to be handled and pawed at a time like this."

Nevertheless, he listened from a sheltered corner of the house while his son addressed the crowd of bearded overlanders and stockmen.

Later, when Eustace came sauntering towards the house, flushed, and out of breath after his speech, Simon ordered a case of whisky to be sent round to the huts.

"They'll guzzle like camels at a tank, and there'll be a few swelled heads riding about the station to-morrow," he growled. "So give them plenty of soda-water with it, Mac, to induce reasonableness into the liquor."

It was almost dark; the sun had set in a mist of fiery red beyond the farthest rim of jungle. A few house-lights pricked the sombre masses of bush in the far south, where the faint tinkle, tinkle of cattle bells made real the tragic emptiness of the vast interior.

Eustace passed his father on the verandah, his face glowing with the welcome he had received. Entering by the drawing-room door, he paused on the threshold, as though the soft warmth of the house had tendered him a loving embrace.

He glanced up at the portrait of his mother above the escritoire, with a slightly throbbing heart, peering into the quiet, dreamy eyes of the woman

who had grown weary of her husband's Titanic struggle with the forest. The face seemed to hold the last of the western light, and as he gazed he felt, perhaps for the first time in life, that with all his acquired knowledge of men and languages he had somehow missed that sweet influence which blades the courage of a man and keeps him pure.

A soft footfall in the passage awoke him from his reverie ; a flutter of a dress disentangled his thoughts. He found himself staring a trifle bleakly at Miss Fortescue.

They did not greet each other. She wore an expression of one who had been trapped and defamed. He spoke first, or rather blundered into speech.

"How are you, Cynthia? Have you been very lonely since your arrival?"

She drew back swiftly from his outstretched hand, as though he had intended to strike her.

"Please don't come nearer. I thought you were in another part of the house." Her voice had a little gasping note ; the small white hands plucked irresolutely at the ivory lace of her sleeves. He remained in the centre of the room, somewhat scared, and visibly penitent.

"I am very sorry if my coming has hurt you, Cynthia. What—what is the matter?"

"Keep away!" Her hands were spread before her. "I don't want to see you again. I thought that——" She paused, glancing right and left, as though seeking some way of retreat. "I want

to go from here. The place has an atmosphere of murder, death ! ”

His penitent aspect changed to a flush of surprise. “ What do you mean, Cynthia ? This is my father’s house. There has been no murder. What ails you ? ”

“ Keep away ! ” she insisted. “ I don’t want your touch. I should carry it to my grave. I may now go from here in peace . . . from this horrid place.”

There was no mistaking the unspoken dread in her eyes. He was inclined to laughter at first, feeling that he was being treated to one of those dramatic entertainments in which she had so often indulged, at his expense, during his Oxford days. Something of her fear chastened his rising laughter.

“ Of course, I’ll keep away, Cynthia,” he declared, humbly. “ I fail to understand, though, the reason of your little outburst. Don’t be unjust.”

“ Unjust to you ! ” She had recovered herself, and was standing with her back to the door. “ Each day spent in your house has been an insult to me. The lies, the stories, the silences ! ”

“ What silences ? ”

“ Your trial ! Oh, the horror of it . . . I heard some one say, the other day, that you came home from Oxford insensible . . . after three years’ absence ; drunk, they said, pitched from the buggy to your father’s feet ! ”

Her eyes glittered now ; her cheeks were crimson. “ And those cattle-thieves, the Bellingers ; that

woman Hetty risking everything to save your skin . . . even her own brother had to be offered up. The horror of it ! ”

She turned and fled along the passage, leaving him staring blankly after her, the bitter truth of her words quickening him to the point of anger.

The verandah door opened ; Mr. Mason stepped lightly into the room. “ What has happened ? ” he inquired, innocently. “ I fancied I heard Miss Fortescue.”

Eustace recovered himself instantly. “ Cynthia has received a bad impression of me. The shock of my trial has been too much for her, I fancy. Those infernal newspapers are responsible. They’ve torn my little reputation to shreds, dissected my very emotions. I’ll swear,” he continued, vehemently, “ that she has seen one of those beastly cartoons which represented me in the clutches of the hangman.”

“ Nonsense, Eustace. Miss Fortescue is angry, perhaps, because you did not come home sooner. I will speak to her if you think it advisable.”

“ You’d better not, Mason. She’s pretty emphatic about leaving here. The pater will make the devil of a fuss.”

“ T’sh ; the devil again, Eustace. We must not invoke him too often.”

The minister stepped to the passage undecidedly, and as he listened there came to him the sound of sobbing from one of the end rooms. Eustace beckoned impatiently.

“ Leave her alone. It isn’t proper to interfere

with a woman when her æsthetic sensibilities are suffering a shock. Let her cry it out."

Both men adjourned to the smoking-room, where Simon joined them a little later. He was full of information concerning the state of Trooper Hannan's health, and his almost miraculous recovery from the bludgeoning received at the hands of Martin Bellinger.

Of David's son very little was known. A large body of police trackers were at work in the district under the leadership of Sergeant Deemer. Being well mounted, it was feared that Martin's capture was an elusive proposition, likely to cost the Government endless expense and worry.

During Simon's absence many troubles, incidental to the management of a big cattle station, had fallen upon Wahgunyah. Slight irruptions of tick and pleuro had been reported from the far northern paddocks; a local stock inspector was at that moment quartered at the overseer's cottage. About a bushel of unopened correspondence awaited Simon in his office, letters from travelling drovers advising him of their progress south with mobs of cattle and horses intended for the sale yards. Others came from various parts of the world, the great Indian remount depots, from Bengali horsebreeders and shipping firms. Some of the envelopes bore foreign Government seals, German, Austrian, English, all dealing with the question of cavalry remounts, prices, pedigrees, and the exact methods to be observed in the transporting of blood stock to a particular port or destination.

After conversing with his son cheerfully for half an hour, Simon retired to his office for the night. Eustace yawned and lounged towards the billiard table, inspected a cue, but upon second thoughts returned it to the rack.

"The pater's a whale for work," he said, dropping into a chair. "He gets through more in a day than I could swallow in a week. His Scotch ancestry, I suppose. To-morrow I begin work; I shall find it infinitely more amusing than being hanged, Mason."

Eustace paused, bit his nails broodingly, and then shot a critical glance at the young minister's handsome face, his spotless linen, his manicured finger tips.

"What are you laughing at, Eustace?" The minister looked up from his pensive attitude in the chair, like one caught unawares.

"I was wondering why you don't marry," Eustace confessed. "Your position in life justifies a certain self-sacrifice."

"Self-sacrifice!" The minister revolved in his chair to meet Eustace eye to eye. "My living is worth one hundred pounds a year. My people are poor, almost impoverished, in fact, and whatever is left of my august stipend goes home. Now, Eustace Fitzallan, what do you think of the Church as a profession for ambitious young men?"

He spoke seriously, without phlegm or bitterness; indeed, his whole bearing reflected contentment and resignation. Eustace gaped at him.

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"Why, of all the rotten——!" he paused and reconsidered his words—"sweated occupations. . ."

"You are very candid, Eustace."

"Candid! Don't I know how you tear and worry through this ant-blighted dustheap to earn your measly pittance? Why, it isn't a stockman's wage!" Eustace checked himself as though ashamed of his outburst. He touched the other's shoulder gently, shook it in a friendly grip. "I didn't mean to hurt you when I said marriage, Mason—upon my word, I thought you were receiving five hundred a year, at least."

The minister laughed good-naturedly. "I am glad that some one is taking an interest in the bush parson. And, having proved my inability to conform to your views on marriage, Eustace, we must turn to your own particular dilemma—Miss Fortescue."

"I am going to be thrown over, Mason, broad acres and all. I never received such a dressing-down, and from a woman who has no more acid in her than a growing flower. She—she called me a horror!"

"You appear to take the matter gracefully for a man who has been called out of his name."

"Well, I expected a hugging, at least." Eustace shook himself vigorously. "By Jove, I may be carrying a gaol appearance with me. I'll have a Turkish bath to-night and sweat it out of myself. The sun and air will do the rest." He turned from the room and nodded to the minister in the chair.

"Good-night, Mason ; I'm going to bed !"

In the passage he met the housekeeper, who drew him unwillingly into the kitchen, shaking her head dismally on the way.

"Mr. Eustace," she began, the moment the kitchen door was closed, "I've a complaint to make against the future Mrs. Fitzallan. You'll be offended with me for talking, but twenty years spent in your house entitles me to a hearing."

"My dear Mrs. Prendegast, why not preserve all complaints with those excellent chutneys and jams of yours." He indicated a row of glass jars on the dresser maliciously.

The housekeeper sat near the door, breathing stertorously. "I'll bear your college wit, Mr. Eustace, but I'll not tolerate Miss Fortescue's prying actions while I remain here. There was no corner safe from her, no man safe from her questioning tongue."

"About me ?"

"About everything under the sun, from Josephs to the shirt your father wears. And the young lady eating his bread and riding his horses."

The housekeeper's shoulders quivered with suppressed anger. Eustace controlled his rising mirth with an effort. Yet his recent interview with Miss Fortescue hurt more than he cared to admit. She had caught him, in an atmosphere of crime, at a period when every paper in the land was detailing his connection with the murder of a Hebrew money-lender. Her sensitive mind had revolted naturally. But why had she remained

at Wahgunyah to taunt him with his misfortune ? It was unwomanly, cowardly he thought.

The housekeeper talked on, illuminating the faults of Miss Fortescue with feminine vigour, until Eustace grew sick of her voice, wearied of the monotonous flow of scandal and vamped-up grievances that some women bear against young and fastidious guests.

So, with a brief nod, he retired from the kitchen to his room, and locked the door. The night was cooler than usual, but his head ached, and his body craved for sleep, after the long nights of confinement in an ill-ventilated cell.

He heard his father walking softly about the house, heard the familiar sounds of belled cattle wandering beyond the stockyard, the soft night wind in the pines, the innumerable caressing whispers that came from the spike-crested palms beside his open windows. How sweet it was to be home again, with the soft, cool sheets to lay his cheek against.

Long after midnight he awoke with the scent of the forest about him, the smell of the rain-sweetened eucalyptus and boronia. And each draught of air brought with it a thought of the woman who had lifted him from prison darkness to the light of day, to a new life that was henceforth to be clean as the forest around him.

He slept again heavily, and when he awoke the sun was slanting over the roof of the bush. Here was the new day in earnest ; a magpie chortled from the homestead rail while he prepared for

his morning swim. With towel on shoulder, he walked briskly to the creek, his nerves aleap for the new things of life.

After his bath he lay for half an hour between some wind-sheltered trees, steeping his naked body in the sun, until the blood tingled through his veins. His father met him at the breakfast-room door with a cheery good-morning. Drawing him into the room, he lowered his voice to a whisper.

"What's wrong with the girly?" he asked. "She's sulking in her tent like that Greek fellow Agamemnon. What's offended her?"

Eustace was reluctant to explain. He had half expected a change in her manner towards him during the day, had hoped that her better nature would prevail and allow him an opportunity of regaining her confidence and respect.

He parried his father's question with some adroitness, for his hurt vanity cried against the way she had treated him. Yet he felt bound to admit the real cause of their estrangement.

"Something of my committal on a charge of shooting Josephs has reached her. I'm awfully sorry, pater. She seems to have swallowed all that stuff the papers printed."

"The Bellinger woman's evidence got on her nerves, I'll warrant." A touch of anger blooded Simon's cheeks, and so breakfast passed with scarcely a word between them.

Mr. Mason had departed earlier than usual on a visit to a family of timber-getters that lived in a hut of slab and bark about nine miles in the

heart of the ranges. The father had been hurt by the fall of a tree, and it was reported that the mother was lying on sacks with a newly born infant. Simon had filled the minister's buggy with stores and medical comforts, while a boundary rider had been dispatched to Engandine for Doctor Beasly.

Miss Fortescue breakfasted in her own room, and at ten o'clock intimated to the housekeeper her intention of leaving Wahgunyah before midday.

The news astounded Simon, for he could not conceive the daughter of a mere half-pay captain flouting his son so mercilessly.

"The girly's mad," he cried to Eustace, "to go back to her father's bread. And why in heaven is she going?"

Mrs. Prendegast came forward and whispered a few words that stilled his wonder and growing indignation. During his absence from Wahgunyah, Miss Fortescue had made arrangements for her future in Queensland. On her own initiative she had offered her services as lady companion to the wife of Squatter Hammersly. William Hammersly was the second wealthiest man in the district, and for months past had been inquiring for an accomplished young Englishwoman to attend his wife. Without sons or daughters, the Hammerslies lived in viceregal splendour in a large house about seven miles from Engandine.

It was plain to Simon that Miss Fortescue understood the handling of her own affairs. Yet he gritted at the prospect of his son's fiancée becoming

a servant in the house of a neighbouring landowner. What imp of perversity had sent her to old Jane Hammersly, the one woman in the district he hated and ignored !

"She'll not be paying Miss Fortescue more than a pound a week," he declared to the housekeeper. "As the wife of Eustace she'd have had the run of half a million ! Can ye explain the awful gyrations of the girly's mind, Mrs. Prendegast ? "

"The girly will be explaining our family history to Jane Hammersly this afternoon," the housekeeper retorted. "Eustace is well rid of such a flyabout ! "

Simon was not easily appeased. Having set his mind on his son's early marriage, he was confounded by the inexplicable turn of affairs. He could not prevent Miss Fortescue leaving Wahgunyah, and he felt himself unequal to the task of appealing to the daughter of a half-pay army captain. Retiring to his office sullenly, he instructed his overseer to attend to Miss Fortescue's luggage the moment she was prepared to leave the homestead.

At eleven o'clock McNeil drove up to the house in a smart phaeton and deposited a small travelling trunk under the seat. A few minutes afterwards Miss Fortescue appeared, wearing a gossamer dust-veil and light brown travelling costume. Outwardly she exhibited no trace of emotion, although her eyes stole furtively along the palm-shadowed verandah, as though seeking a familiar shape.

Simon came with quick steps to the front of the

house, his face working strangely. "You're leaving us in a hurry, Miss Fortescue," he declared. "I take it that you, and not my son, have broken off the engagement?"

She turned on the verandah steps, her hand resting on the rail. "Surely, Mr. Fitzallan, you do not expect me to stay after what has happened?"

"I did not expect my son's sweetheart to desert us so soon. Ye came far enough to claim him, Cynthia, and ye fly away at the first breath of misfortune that passes over our house."

"It was an outrage!" she flashed back. "A police affair; a horrible crime. Why—why do you question my going? If your son had come to my home, Mr. Fitzallan, and had found me under ban of murder, he would surely have craved a little time to reconsider his feelings."

The beauty of her face was heightened by the faint scarlet of her cheeks, the clear light of anger in her wide grey eyes. She passed down the verandah steps daintily, the buttons of her pretty shoes winking in the sunlight.

Simon held himself, because he felt the nearness of his son. Slowly, regally, Miss Fortescue took her place in the phaeton while the old cattle king nursed the wrath that was sharpened by a touch of despair. Did this young creature echo the world's opinion of his son? Was he so degraded that a penniless minx, the daughter of a drunken army captain, could insult him on his own verandah?

He leaned over the verandah rail, and his baying voice reached McNeil in the phaeton.

"Take her anywhere, Mac—to Hammersly's or to the——!" Turning on his heel, he strode back to his office, trembling with suppressed rage.

Eustace had walked to the sliprail, and had met the phaeton, as it left the house gates, determined to have a final word with the woman who had thrown him over.

"May I drive a little with you?" he asked, meekly. "There are so many loose ends that require adjusting."

"I found loose ends wherever I put my hand," she responded, frankly. "Too many for me to tie, Eustace."

He did not answer for a while, but walked beside the phaeton until the track diverged towards the Engandine road. McNeil, with the reins, slowed down to ensure the young master a hearing.

"Are you quite certain, Cynthia," he ventured, at last, "that you are acquainted with the whole facts of the case? Have you reviewed them fairly?"

"Quite."

"But you have found me guilty in the face of a jury's verdict?"

"Your innocence or guilt matters very little to me now, Eustace. My mind—I possess one, fortunately—is suffering from shock. My sensibilities have been outraged. I think you, of all men, should understand."

"Thank you. Good-bye."

And so they parted. He stood in the track for several minutes, watching the phaeton as it trundled

down the grassy incline to the sand-covered flat below. A halo of sun-illuminated dust enshrouded it. Once only did she look back, and it occurred to him that she was wiping the dust from her eyes with a 'kerchief.

CHAPTER XIX

JANE HAMMERSLY was laughing softly when her husband entered the drawing-room. The scar-like furrows of her face softened like one who tastes unlooked-for sweets at the end of a bitter draught.

William Hammersly contemplated the nodding head, the silvery sheen of its hair, and grunted contentedly. "Well, Jane, you do seem pleased at last. It's nigh on eight years since I caught you laughing."

"I'm going to keep it up, Will. It's only costing me a pound a week and her keep. And it's much better than running off to theatres."

The ironbark trees that grew everywhere about the station seemed to have imparted something of their fibrous tenacity to the white-haired little woman in the cane chair. The long brown hands drawn over her knees had once wielded axe and whip in her husband's interest; bullocks and trees had responded to her blows. Men feared her voice, loafers and tramps avoided her like a plague. Twenty years before she had worked bareheaded beside her husband, clearing scrub land, carrying mauls and wedges for the men who slew the cedar giants, and bared the land for the plough. To

have yoked teams and lit forest fires was enough for a woman. If she whimpered at the hardness of life, it was because her husband did not push his fences farther beyond the mountain line, where the brigalows met the salt bush, and the heat waves danced moon-white upon the bones of famished cattle.

Only one rival had they, one peer, whose heart and brain had parcelled the land a month before their coming. Only a month. Jane Hammersly calculated that, in allowing Simon Fitzallan four weeks' start, in their rush for the river lands, her husband had forfeited his rightful kingdom. Simon had taken all, and left them the ironbarks.

While his cattle fattened quickly, theirs starved. Simon's wife had sickened, but she left a son. Jane Hammersly never knew illness nor children of her own. And the fact had gnawed into her heart, and wearied her more than the slaying of trees or the yoking of oxen.

Yet she and her husband had done well. Herculean labour and the expenditure of money had compelled the river to fructify the land. Good seasons had enriched them, in later years, until William Hammersly found it necessary to ease brain and muscle by employing an overseer. Jane acquired the habit of silk dresses, and preened herself in the long summer afternoons on the fly-proof verandah that fronted the Engandine road. Both had watched Simon's successes and failures, counting and comparing them with their own. He had beaten them in the big beef contracts

with the German Government, while his ordinary stock brands claimed more attention in the Indian horse markets, and, above all, he had a son to inherit his broad acres, that stretched from Engandine in the south to the edge of the Consuelo plateau.

Yet no word of anger had ever passed between them. When Eustace was arrested and sentenced to death, William Hammersly was first among the squatters of the Maranoa to tender his sympathy and regret. The new trial, which resulted in Eustace's acquittal, eased Jane's mind, for she did not desire the young Oxonian to walk to the gallows before his time.

Her interest in the Fitzallans deepened after Miss Fortescue's arrival. Word flew through the district that the English girl with the beautiful manners had come to claim the son of Simon in wedlock. Jane was interested, and watched the swift procession of events with eagle eyes.

Each day the mailman brought her news from Wahgunyah. She heard of the minister's visit, the care which every one in Simon's household exercised in suppressing the real cause of Eustace's absence.

Jane chuckled when she heard of Miss Fortescue's resolve to leave Wahgunyah. The girl had blood in her, she thought, wilfully to abandon the heir to a million acres, and to treat as sand the bulging money-chest of Queensland's lordliest squatter.

The thunderclap came when it was known that

the daughter of Captain Fortescue was seeking a position as governess among the select families of Engandine. Cynthia had a dozen immediate offers from certain well-to-do farmers' wives, but the one that Jane Hammersly made to her was gilt-edged and profoundly exclusive.

The offer was accepted.

Jane Hammersly preened herself in the sunlight, brought out her new black silk dress, and laughed consumedly.

Mr. Hammersly viewed the matter despondently. "She'll be no use to us," he predicted. "Much better to have hired one of those Brannigan girls. They could milk cows and chop wood at a pinch."

"It's the last flutter I'm ever likely to make, Bill Hammersly. She'll give tone to the house; she'll give us style. None of your Brannigans for me."

Jane smoothed out her dress and walked with a new stateliness across her drawing-room. Mr. Hammersly was considerably over six feet, and usually wore his spurs when indoors. Jane eyed his stockyard clothes critically and sighed.

"Try a change of tweeds and leave your steels on the mat, Billy, next time we have company," she suggested, pleasantly. "Do a flutter with me for a while; swear at your tailor to-morrow; make him lift the droop out of your shoulders. We're not a pair of old gunny bags because we happen to be rich."

Squatter Hammersly laughed at his wife's sug-

gestions, although he foresaw that his household was about to undergo drastic changes with the entry of Miss Cynthia Fortescue.

"It's a profitless business, Jane," he demurred. "You'll tire of this girl companion in a month. We're not her sort. She'll go back to the Fitzallans and make it up with Eustace."

"That's where my flutter comes in!" Jane's eyes sparkled at the points; she stroked the silver wisps of hair into smoothness under her cap. "I'm fearing, Billy, that she'll want to go back to the cub and the money-chest. I don't want that. I've another scheme afoot."

"What scheme?" he asked, suspiciously.

"To marry the minx to our poor little minister. What else would I be doing? A stroke like that would be worth all the cows in Christendom."

Mr. Hammersly gaped at her, and then broke into uproarious laughter. "Why, Jane, I thought you were nursing some bitter villainy at the back of your head! I've no grudge against Simon or his lad. This looks like a first-rate joke."

"I'm painting the nose of Simon's tragedy, Billy. The man wanted everything in life, and got most of his wants. The little Fortescue girl has hurt him to the quick. She's pretty and tasty, the kind of woman he had never seen before. She can put on a pair of gloves without sticking out her elbows like a man after goats. Bill"—Jane settled the tuck of her blouse, and winked—"you'll have to build me a stone church on the corner block facing the Flinders and Engandine roads."

Squatter Hammersly's good humour vanished instantly. His mental pitch was keyed to his wife's vagaries in general, but her sudden demand for a stone church left him speechless. Jerking himself from his chair beside her, he started hastily for the door.

"Bill"—she crooked her finger playfully—"come back and prove me a lunatic."

"I didn't say you were, Jane," he protested. "Although a church of stone would cost me a couple of thousand pounds. The one on the hill is a good enough kirk."

"Tin roof, and hot as a baker's oven in summer. There's a mud-hole in front that would drown an alligator. Bill, will you make up your mind about the new house of God? We have a quarry of workable stones a mile from here. You've built dams and drilled holes, a mile deep in the earth, to water your bulls and horses; throw up a few blocks of stone for the honour and glory of—us."

William bit his nails, grumbled something about the waste of hard-earned money, but was speedily silenced by the crooked finger and the scintillating eyes.

"Money, money, money; that's been our cry for thirty years, William. We've pulled down belts of timber that would cover an army—to get it; we've ploughed and cursed the earth to add another bagful of metal to our banking account. And what are we to-day? Without chick or child to stop us yawning off our heads of an evening.

We play euchre till we're sick of each other's voices. Help me do a flutter, William. Build me a good stone church, and we'll whistle all the young people together this side of Engandine. The minister is mine. You'll write him a note this afternoon asking him to come here. He has a weakness for mahogany pulpits and oaken pews. Go now, William, and leave me to think."

She waved him from the room cheerfully, stopped her ears at his final mutter of protest, and followed him to the door.

"Think of me starving nigh on thirty years, camping among niggers, with a gun for a bedfellow, for fear that a buck myall would jump into the wagon. Lord, Billy, what do we want with money?"

Mr. Hammersly appeared glad to be out in the open stockyard, where a mixed mob of unbroken colts had been rounded up for inspection. The cracking of a whip caught his ear; turning, he beheld a smart phaeton driving up to the house. He recognised the driver, McNeil, as one of Simon's head men, and his eyes widened when he saw Miss Fortescue descend from the front seat.

Jane appeared on the verandah to welcome the daughter of Captain Fortescue, and to escort her with the air of a world-old chaperon into her spacious reception-room.

William Hammersly wiped some specks of dust from his grizzled beard, and then turned with a sigh towards the whinnying mob of colts.

Cynthia Fortescue was glad enough to rest a little in the cool, well-ventilated apartment after

her drive along a dusty bush track. McNeil had proved himself an execrable driver; wheel ruts and grass tree stumps had jolted her unmercifully, while the overseer appeared unconscious of the torture he was inflicting.

Cynthia was not certain that she liked this white-haired woman in the black silk dress. The appointments of the station homestead, although lacking the up-to-date magnificence of the Fitzallans' house-bungalow, were comfortable enough. All around the verandah were beds of rare native flowers.

White roses peeped everywhere through the overhanging trellis, and the fragrant boronia assailed her with unforgettable raptures as she passed to her room.

Jane Hammersly was sufficiently conversant with the ways of society to refrain from talking to a travel-weary guest.

Past midday a couple of police trackers halted at the homestead on their way to the ranges, where Martin Bellinger was reported to be in hiding. David, they stated, was living with his son Clarry at the cottage, cultivating his land and professing an utter indifference concerning the fate of his rebel offspring.

About three o'clock the troopers set out again, and Miss Fortescue watched them canter away, her mind filled with thoughts of the man who had so recently escaped their toils, and whose house she had so recently left in a spirit of dread and outraged susceptibilities.

Her duties began the following day, and it must be admitted that her second impression of Jane Hammersly was more favourable than the first. The initial topic of conversation was the projected building of the church and the installation of Gerard Mason as the resident minister.

Jane Hammersly was very frank about their early pioneering struggles, the eternal fight with the forest, the hostility of Simon Fitzallan, who had played the grass lord for thirty years, heckling them with warrants for trespass, impounding their stock in default of certain payments, and inciting the Lands Department to curtail their grazing rights in time of drought and financial distress.

She was not slow to point out the retribution which had overtaken the Fitzallans, for though Eustace had been acquitted without a stain on his character, the odium of the trial would cling to him all his life.

These two strangely mated women passed the mornings together in the garden, pruning rare tropical flowers and plants, while in the evenings Miss Fortescue entertained her mistress with Chopin concertos, rendered with exquisite balance and technique. Jane Hammersly was in no way bored by her young companion's brilliant efforts, for although her own toil-warped fingers were incapable of the simplest musical exercises, her copious mind was not insensible to the beautiful themes of a Beethoven or a Brahms.

Yet through all her brilliant exercises and well-conducted chatter, Cynthia Fortescue betrayed

a certain uneasiness of mind, evinced in her desire to ride alone in the early morning down the silence-haunted track where Eustace had met Hetty Belinger on his return from Oxford.

"She's thinking of Simon's cub," Jane confided to her husband. "There's a softening process going on, a silly-billy kind of relenting, I've no doubt. I wonder when that pulpit-hitting minister will be here."

William Hammersly muttered something about the unreliability of the mails in that part of the country, and gave it as his opinion that the minister would be a hard bird to cage, even with the prettiest girl in Queensland luring him to the snare.

"She may not have to sing high C," laughed Jane, "to bring my minister bird to hand. I'll wager a shilling to a carriage and pair that he'll be teaching her a new hymn this day month. Is it a bet, Billy?"

"It's costing me a church," grumbled Hammersly; "not mentioning the up-keep."

"The bells will ring you to sleep, Billy. You'll find them soothing."

"Bells!" He almost glared at her. "There won't be any. Why, a peal of bells costs as much as a team of bullocks, Jane. Besides," Mr. Hammersly felt his whiskers dejectedly, "I like a change of noises of Sunday, especially when I'm paying for them."

"My dear Billy, we're rich enough to afford a change of Niagaras if the sound of too much water didn't suit us. It isn't every day that a woman

has the ordering of a peal of bells. Don't deny them to me. Why——"

She rose from her chair on the verandah, and stared under her hand at a white-coated figure riding slowly up to the house.

"It's the minister bird!" she chuckled. "My letter brought him here." She scanned the approaching minister eagerly, noting every movement and shade of expression as his horse ambled into the drive.

"Down in the lip, or maybe it's the sun that's screwing his face out of joint. Shake hands with him, Billy, when he takes off his hat," she advised.

Mr. Hammersly started to his feet uneasily, and glanced at his watch. "I'll be late for the afternoon mail if I stay another minute, Jane. I'll see you both later on."

Retreating from the verandah, he hurried across the yard towards his private office, a small weather-board structure nestling in the shade of a clump of silky oaks.

Mr. Mason dismounted and threw his reins over a post. Ascending the verandah steps, he was greeted warmly by Jane Hammersly and escorted to a cool seat, where a breeze from the hills was thrashing the palms overhead.

"I saw your husband," he began, maliciously; "I trust that my coming has not driven him away."

"Oh, he's gone to order the bells," she declared garrulously. "I've been expecting you the last

three days. The air is thick with rumours, as the story-book says. One thing is certain, however—there'll be a solid foundation and a watertight roof to the new church, Mr. Mason."

She sat beside him, fanning herself with a huge pandanus leaf. He had visited them often in the past, bringing with him news of the great bush that lay beyond their uttermost boundaries. His work carried him into the shearers' hut and the camps of the overlanders, where he was hailed as a brother by these hard-living, hard-swearing children of the plains. His presence in those out-of-the-way regions was a palliative against the demons of loneliness and insanity which frequently assailed the sick boundary rider and the impenitent land thief.

As a minister, he gossiped with discretion. Feuds between local families were plentiful enough, and compelled the utmost tact and diplomacy in the reciting of news bearing on social events.

Jane Hammersly's letter to him, outlining her scheme for building a church at her husband's expense, won him instantly, yet, with all his affected buoyancy of manner, Jane noted an undercurrent of distress, as though some recent anxiety had disturbed him.

She pressed him tactfully, still holding up her church as an infallible allurements. He had, it seemed, called at Wahgunyah on his way back to Engandine from one of his back-country visits, and had discovered Simon in a state of depression. Eustace had left the house three days before, and

had not returned. No motive could be assigned for his leaving. He had been seen last at the Engandine railway station purchasing a ticket for Brisbane. With only a few pounds in his possession, it was assumed by many that the young Oxonian would be driven homeward from sheer stress of circumstances within a day or two. Mr. Mason shook his head dubiously.

"I cannot think why he should have left so mysteriously. Beyond a few minor cares his wildest wishes were capable of fulfilment. And, if I may say it, Eustace possessed a handsome and engaging personality."

Jane Hammersly listened in quiet wonder. Here was something beyond her reckoning; something which threatened to modify her motherly scheme of retaliation. She had expected Eustace to show himself like some jilted swain about her house or grounds, begging an interview with Miss Fortescue. Nothing had happened; he had not even written.

To have married her minister to the daughter of Captain Fortescue while Eustace was nursing his hurt vanity would have been a well-directed blow at the house of her enemy. The minister might have demurred on sentimental grounds. But the church and Cynthia were two big levers, and the experiment had been worth trying.

Some germ of content lay in the fact that the woman who had caused the demoralisation of Simon's household was in her service. But where had Eustace gone, she asked herself? Surely he

was not mad enough to kill himself for the sake of Cynthia Fortescue !

Mr. Mason did not echo her doubts. A gratifying suspicion had entered his mind that Eustace was rejoicing somewhere in his new-found liberty.

The swish of a skirt brought him to his feet. Miss Fortescue, holding several letters in her hand, emerged from a side room, and Jane Hammersly could only admire the artistic elevation of her eyebrows at sight of the minister.

"I hope," said Jane, cordially, "that no quarrel exists between you two people. Just now the world seems filled with men and women eager to destroy each other's happiness."

Cynthia's reply was drowned by the minister's hearty assurance of his everlasting friendship for her. He regretted having attempted to shield his friend Eustace, upon a certain memorable occasion, and he hoped that Miss Fortescue would allow bygones to be bygones."

"I am delighted to find you here," she responded, sweetly. "I have just written a letter for Mrs. Hammersly to a bell-founder in Brisbane. Do you know anything about bells, Mr. Mason?" she asked, naïvely.

Jane laughed outright. "My lady secretary should not divulge business secrets. We take it for granted that every minister knows when to ring them, anyway."

"Billy," she said to her husband that night, after the minister had gone, "the dear boy is teaching her hymns already."

“Umph!” grunted William. “The lowest price quoted for a mahogany pulpit is seventy-six guineas, my dear. I don’t know what those con—— I beg your pardon, Jane—those bells will come to.”

CHAPTER XX

THE district of Engandine had prospered exceedingly since the building of Jane Hammersly's church. Its completion marked a new era for the struggling selectors of the Maranoa. From the day its foundation-stone was laid, by the Bishop of Queensland, the town awoke to a sense of growing importance. Eighteen months had been occupied in its erection, and when Jane Hammersly walked down the aisle, to attend the inaugural service, a hymn of thanksgiving had burst forth from five hundred throats.

Two years of hard district work had not impaired the vigour and enthusiasm of Gerard Mason. He had found time, in the intervals of his monthly rounds, to advise Jane Hammersly in regard to various details in connection with the building of her church. Jane had also consulted Miss Fortescue, frequently in the minister's presence, until it seemed that the society of these two young people had become indispensable to her.

Yet Jane had not succeeded in her desired object. Miss Fortescue remained cold apparently to Gerard Mason's presence whenever they met on the big homestead verandah. To the watching Jane it

appeared incredible that two people, agreeing in tastes and dispositions, should so consistently avoid the main issue. The work of organising a choir had brought them together during the long winter evenings and in the early mornings of spring, when the very flowers and the scent of the forest called to them. Yet both had remained dumb, inarticulate in the face of a myriad promptings. What was the cause?

Jane had cudgelled her mind for an answer. During the building of the church she had lost something of her hatred of the Fitzallans. With Eustace out of the way, and Simon fast bending to the grave, she felt that her own life called for justification. And the coming of Cynthia Fortescue, with her pretty English manners and graces, had awakened the dormant mother in her. Again and again the young girl had shown a desire to leave her service and return to her people in England, only to be placated and flattered by a new outburst of affection and remonstrances from the austere Jane. Cynthia's yearly salary had been augmented beyond her wildest dreams, and she had been enabled to send many welcome cheques to her struggling relatives in England.

William Hammersly was inclined to growl at his wife's open-handedness, but, like Jane, he looked forward each evening to the pleasant chatter in the drawing-room, interspersed with musical selections rendered by their accomplished young dependant. Hitherto William had whiled away his evenings in his stuffy, badly ventilated office, sur-

rounded by old newspapers and piles of correspondence. His final judgment of his wife's conduct was that she had brightened her own life and his, without hurting a single person in the world.

"You've got to beware of these young people," he confessed with a laugh. "You bring 'em into your house with a notion of carrying out some particular hard-and-fast plan—like Jane did. By and by they get hold of you, and in a month, or two, you find yourself wondering what they are doing if they happen to be away from the homestead. There's that Gerard Mason, now. Why, I never thought him worth a dish of corn-feed until I got to know him properly. Just a stiff-collared young parson, I thought him, ready to take up a collection if he saw three people standing together in a doorway. He still wears his collar, but I reckon he's the cleanest-minded, best-tempered fellow this side of the border.

"Jane likes him, I like him; and, taking one thing with another, he's helped to brighten this dead-and-alive home of ours. Anyhow, I'll bet a half-crown it's got more real sunshine in it than Fitzzy's, with all his millions!"

And that was the state of affairs when the wet season came, and the river sang its full-flood note, under the trestle bridge, about a mile from Wahgunyah. The storm-driven cattle moved with ghostly stealth along the narrow tracks towards the shelter of the homesteads. For two months the pitiless monsoon had loosed its floodgates on the land. River and creeks had drunk their

fill until the wild cattle seemed driven to shelter by the merciless whips of the rain.

Around Wahgunyah a ceaseless activity prevailed. Steaming squadrons of cattle were being daily brought in from the flood areas and low-lying country to the higher pasturage in the hills. The yelping of dogs, the rattle of muster whips filled the long, dripping days. Occasionally Simon Fitzallan, mounted on a lean camp horse, flitted wraith-like amid the pandemoniums of hoofs and horns.

Simon's hair and beard showed white in the rain ; the stiffness had gone from his square shoulders, lending him a slouching and furtive air, as he glanced right and left among his stockriders. His voice had lost its baying note ; a querulous uncertainty dogged his movements, as one dreading another blow from the hand of fate.

He knew that his son was alive somewhere in the far south. One letter only in two years had reached him, a letter full of sturdy self-reproach and affection for the bitter-voiced father, whose hopes and dreams had turned to naught.

Simon had put the letter aside with a savage gesture. He had no use for deserters and quitters. He had hewn a kingdom of men and horses from the forest ; it lay before him now in grassy splendour, flanked by mountains and rivers, a kingdom that sent countless tons of beef and wealth to a hungry world. And this kingdom had been placed at the feet of an unworthy son, and rejected in a moment of lunatic pride.

That son would yet return (Simon gritted his teeth at the thought) and beg for work like a starving tramp or man out of gaol.

The Bellingers, who had wrought so much evil upon his house, had somehow escaped the clutches of the law. Martin had eluded the police, and was supposed to be prospering in the West. Affliction and remorse had not overtaken David; he had merely grown stouter, more genial as the years passed, ploughing his land and singing at his work, as though heaven and earth had done their best for him and his rebel sons.

Of Hetty, not a word. Gerard Mason was too busy with his new church to give ear to the gossip about her that passed for gospel truth.

Looking back upon his own life, Simon was conscious of the futility of his Titanic labours. For thirty years he had uplifted the art of money-making to a religion. He had fought and ruined men for possession of a dozen acres of land. His vicious plunderings had affected whole communities. Hundreds of families had been squeezed into the barren areas beyond the mountains to accommodate his fast-multiplying hoofs and horns. In all his conflicts with Nature he invariably emerged victorious. His scheme of irrigation and his artesian bores settled the drought question, and reduced the devastating powers of the sun to a negligible quantity. Yet he could not control, for one instant, the invisible destiny that severed him from human kind.

After all, Jane Hammersly and her husband had

succeeded where he had failed. They had abandoned the quest for gold, and had invested in a little human sympathy. Jane's happy laughter, that was once so full of bitterness, proved the wisdom of her later-day speculations.

Jane and William had not won happiness because a church had arisen on one of their vacant allotments; their ultimate triumph lay in the fact that neither had surrendered their complete interest in life.

A voice whispered to Simon that it was not too late, but his unconquerable nature responded with a snarl of defiance. Another week slipped by, and the rain-shrouded land hid its grey face in the torrents of downflowing water. Swarms of pigmy geese and wild fowl abounded on the outside lagoons. The season promised to be a record one for grass and herbage, and the men in the huts talked of the big musterings in New England, where the drought-harassed squatters were moving their starved herds north, to the Maranoa, to save them from perishing.

Simon was sitting alone in his office brooding over his ledgers, his dim eyes ferreting among blinding columns of figures, as though to scent out some mistaken entry on the part of his already overworked bookkeeper.

The tropic night was full of strange sounds. From the forest edge came the slow, plunging note of a river in full flood. The noise of it rose and fell rhythmically, strong, merciless, yet beautiful in its new-found voice and power. Simon had drunk

in its liquid melody for thirty years. It had quieted him in hours of torment and privation, had spilled riches in its wake and drowned the ogre of insolency that stared through the first years of his pioneering venture.

Simon listened and dozed alternately over the ledgers. A great weariness had stolen upon him, the weariness of over-riches and self-isolation. McNeil had retired for the night. Mrs. Prendegast, the housekeeper, had gone to Engandine for a holiday, leaving the house in charge of the Chinese manservant.

A sound of wheels, far down the path, stirred Simon from his broodings. Very slowly, it seemed, they found their way along the palm-skirted avenue to the house door. The roar of the rain on the roof drowned further sound.

Simon moved sullenly in his chair. The thought of receiving a visitor at so late an hour angered him. He had sat for endless nights alone in his office, and no one acquainted with his habits would have cared to rouse him from his books at such a time.

Footsteps sounded on the verandah, quick, unhesitating, until they stopped at the office door. The old stockbreeder crouched in his chair as one who expected some strange visitor from the underworld. Only one person he knew had such footsteps.

The door opened very gently, and Eustace peeped in. His clothes dripped rain, his hair lay a little weather-blown about his forehead. Simon noted

in a dazed, half-seeing way that he was holding a cap in his hand.

The old man seemed to huddle in his chair, his chin down, his eyes ablaze. "Ah!" The word left him as though something had pressed his throat. "Ye've come at last—ye quitter!"

Eustace breathed deeply, as though restraining himself from an outburst. In the two years of absence he had pictured this meeting with his father, felt the sneers and execrations flung at him the moment he crossed the threshold of his home.

"Father," he said gently, "I left here with the air of a prison steaming through my senses, pursued by every kind of ill-luck that could follow a man."

"Ye quitted," Simon repeated, savagely, "to hunt out a soft hiding-place. Deny it if ye can."

"I quitted here to take up the fight elsewhere," Eustace replied, "and to pay a debt of gratitude and love I owed to the woman who dragged me from the gallows. There are so many ways of quitting, pater. I chose the one that was stiff and mostly thorns from the beginning. It killed the chicken in me, though, and somehow I'm feeling like a man."

Simon sat bolt upright to glare at him. "Ye married that girl . . . Het Bellinger!"

A coarse jibe followed, but the heckling laugh that accompanied it passed unnoticed by the quiet-browed son standing near the doorway. Only for

a flash did anger seem alive in him. He remained motionless almost, while the rain made strange fluting noises under the wide-eaved verandah outside. The young Oxonian had come to win his fight, to beat back the seas of impotent rage that rose in this white-lipped father. He would make no more mistakes. His own debts had been paid in full, and he had yet to make amends to this lonely old man for the irreparable blunderings of his earlier years.

After the first inevitable outburst Simon cooled perceptibly. The folly of wounding in sheer lust of passion came back to him by degrees. And with his dying rage came the thought of his growing impotence, the knowledge of lost power and swift-ebbing life.

He seemed to doze in his chair, as though unconscious of his son's presence. The marching note of the flood-waters timed the loud beatings of his heart. He felt himself borne upon its wild bosom far beyond the forest, into the starlit silence of infinity.

Youth will be served—will be served! The river flung the words back to his wandering mind, repeated them in the muttering bass of a hundred rain-fed torrents.

Then he looked up slowly, because his son's voice had broken the spell of the river. There was no mistaking his clear, incisive tones.

"Father, do you think I could have allowed Hetty to drift, after I had found her in Brisbane?"

"You found her!" Simon echoed, dully, and bent forward in a half-listening attitude.

"In the slums, working for a soul-sweating mission society. She was in a state of fever when I hunted her down, worn out with sitting up all night with other members of the —— idiotic brigade. Well, I sent her to a decent lodging-house, and hustled round for a job myself. It took me some time before I arrived at anything that promised more than mere bread-and-butter. Gardover & Kent, a big firm of stock-raisers, offered me a billet as station accountant, £3 a week and all found. I gripped the offer with both hands, settled to work for eight months, and received another offer as manager of one of their leasehold properties on the borders of New England.

"Found everything in a state of criminal neglect when I arrived. No water, no tanks, only a drunken overseer and a gang of nigger rouseabouts. Fired the lot, and started with new blood. Worked myself sixteen hours a day, until the property really looked fit to feed a few head of stock."

"But this Het Bellinger?" interrupted Simon, acidly. "What was she doing?"

Eustace reddened to his hair-roots. "Oh, Het and I were married before I accepted the manager's job. I couldn't have pulled through without her, pater. You know how she can handle horses. Besides, she relieved me of a lot of beastly book work when things were as rotten as could be. I wanted to prove myself, and I don't think any man

was ever helped so by a woman. All last summer, when the cattle were travelling for grass, and the railway lines were blocked with truckloads of starving stock, she rode with me for six weeks behind the biggest mob of cattle that ever left New England. We pulled out on good grass, twenty miles inside the Queensland border, because Het knew every pad and cattle track south of the Maranoa."

Eustace paused, and stooped over the huddled figure in the chair. "Father, I know how you despised David Bellinger and his children. He stole your cattle and laughed at you. He was the one man in the world who ever came near to breaking your lion heart, just as his rebel son came near to looping my neck with a hangman's rope."

Simon's eyes reddened; he gestured fiercely at his son. "Ye healed matters by marrying one of his brood! Queer logic for a man of education!"

"The logic of the heart, pater. It defies philosophers and university professors, it makes madness appear rational, turns folly into wisdom."

Eustace laughed a little as he continued. "The curious part of my marriage is that Hetty is not flattered by her alliance with the house of Fitzallan."

Simon winced in his chair. "That woman who—who lived by stealing my cattle. That woman——"

"Never touched a steer or colt belonging to

us," Eustace interrupted flatly. "She admits being the daughter of a gentleman connected with the trade, just as I am connected with a very excellent gentleman who fleeced the Colony of Queensland of several million acres of territory."

"She says that?" Simon snapped, "the impertinent, gallivanting young——"

Eustace drowned his words with laughter, then, taking a cigar from the box near at hand, dropped into a chair and smoked hungrily for half a minute. Simon regarded him dourly.

"Will this grand dame of yours return to the district to uphold the name of Fitzallan?" he asked, pointedly.

Eustace shook his head. "I'm afraid not, pater. She is very happy in her New England home. The baby, you see——"

"The baby!" Simon's eyebrows wagged; he plucked at his thin beard with nervous, age-stricken fingers. Eustace nodded, and braced himself in his chair.

"We must perpetuate the good old name, pater. This country is full of childless men and women," he added, with a note of rebuke in his voice. "Good names die out. Nothing is left of the old families. Yes," he concluded, thoughtfully, "we have got our little son, and Het doesn't bother much about this part of the world."

"I thought she had a liking for Wahgunyah," Simon broke in dryly. "Well, well . . ."

He fell to brooding again, while Eustace smoked contentedly in the arm-chair. Occasionally his

old eyes flashed an inquiring glance upon the handsome-browed son beside him, and his memory groped back to the old pioneering days when Martha, his wife, had carried Eustace, a baby, in a straw-filled basket on the seat of the bullock dray. Through forests and mountain gulleys they had journeyed, their camp fires startling the wild dogs in the ranges.

What a simple and delightful existence it had seemed then, before the wealth came. His money had brought nothing, meant nothing. The few things he had hoped it would bring had been snatched away, and only the wealth remained.

He found himself listening again to the river, and the flood-note was always the same, only it seemed less terrible now that his son was with him.

He was subconsciously aware that Eustace had finished his cigar, and had risen from his chair. It occurred to him, also, that he was preparing to depart, to leave him perhaps for another interminable period.

"You'll not be going to-night, Eustace!" he jerked out. "You'll never find the track between here and the township."

Eustace pondered briefly as he buttoned his rain-proof coat. He had no thought of compelling his father's humiliation. It hurt him to see the bent white head and shaking fingers. Yet he could not live apart, even for a day, from the woman who had sacrificed all worldly ties to serve him.

"I must return to my responsibilities," he said,

quietly. "And my wife being an impertinent, gallivanting——"

"She called me a thief, Eustace, by your own showing," interrupted Simon, querulously. "I'll take back the word gallivanting, anyhow. Her father tried me sore. Her brother nearly hanged ye, if ye remember."

Simon, in that moment, saw the remaining years of life staring bleakly ahead, the pitiless days and months when he would eat and work until the grave drew him into the unutterable Silence.

His head fell forward slightly, and again the river whispered hoarsely that it was not yet too late. It had spoken to him thus on the night when his wife had passed . . . and now, while his son hovered between the door and his last farewell—it would be his last he felt certain—Simon was moved beyond hatred of enemies in the consuming desire for his son's love.

"Ye'd better stay on, Eustace. . . . Bring the bairn . . . the wife. God, man, I can say no more."

"Father, I don't want you to say it. Try and forgive me; forgive my wife the hundred sins committed by her people."

It seemed as though Simon had forgotten the wounds received during his thirty years' strife with David Bellinger. He did not speak for a little while, neither did he shrink from his son's embracing arms. The dawn was upon them before the last word had been spoken, words that implied more than tenderness or regrets. And the sun had

driven through the sombre rain-clouds when Eustace started from the homestead gate to join his wife and baby in New England, and to carry to them a message of love and forgiveness from the man who had almost surrendered his faith in human kind.

CHAPTER XXI

"ABOUT time you put the question to Cynthia, Mr. Mason. Two years wasted already, and both of you wilting like a pair of sick doves."

Jane Hammersly caught the minister's sleeve, and drew him into the brilliant sunlight outside the church. Although he frowned slightly, his eyes had grown bright at the sound of her voice.

"You mean that I ought to propose to Miss Fortescue," he said, quickly.

"That and nothing more, Gerard Mason. We are getting left. Here is Eustace back home in all his glory, wife, bairn, and Simon singing to them from his arm-chair. And we thinking that the whelp had a heart to break!"

Jane had called at the church early in the morning, where the minister was usually to be found any time before ten o'clock. Her carriage stood outside the gates, and the champing of the horses' bits reached them as they conversed on the strip of lawn that fronted the church entrance.

The news of Eustace's return to Wahgunyah, accompanied by his wife and child, had only reached Gerard Mason that morning. The local newspaper was full of the astonishing event. The son of Queensland's wealthiest pastoralist had been

married to the daughter of David Bellinger for two years ! It was an incredible piece of news to the people who remembered the time when Simon had cursed the name of Bellinger root and branch.

Gerard Mason escorted Jane Hammersly to her carriage, pondering on the strange turn of events. She rapped his knuckles with her fan as she took her seat, and bade him sit beside her.

" You are coming home with me, sir. There are to be no more postponements. You'll put the question to Cynthia the minute she comes from her room. I'll send her out to the verandah."

Jane smoothed her black silk dress deliberately, raised her chin to get a glimpse of herself in the mirror above, and sighed. " Think of this Het Bellinger nipping the sweetness out of my schemes ; she, the daughter of that old cow-stealer, David ! "

" My dear Mrs. Hammersly, pray remember ! "

" D'y'e think I'd have mentioned it if I hadn't ! " Jane sat up among the cushions, breathing sharply. " We are going to call on the Fitzallans some time to-day. How do you like it ? "

" Do you think Cynthia will accompany you ? "

" Yes, if she accepts you for a husband. We'll go to exchange compliments. I've waited twenty years for such an event."

" I do not feel certain that Miss Fortescue will accept me," he responded, blankly. " Give me a week to consider the matter."

" Not a minute longer, Gerard Mason. I've given you two years. Clap the matter before her immediately you reach the house."

The carriage started home at a fast trot, and the young minister felt at last that his hour had come. He was glad that Eustace had returned, married, and settled in mind. It made the delicate task of approaching Cynthia Fortescue much easier.

"If Cynthia accepts me I shall indeed be happy. But"—he turned a wry face to Jane Hammersly—"if she refuses me——"

"I'll get another minister," was the snapped-out reply. "You will then be at liberty to adopt bushranging as a means of earning a living, for you'll no longer exist as an adopted son of mine, my dear Gerard."

The carriage entered the homestead gates, and rattled towards the tall house that stood in sharp silhouette against a background of forest and range. Jane descended from the carriage hurriedly, and, with a final word of caution to the palpitating minister, vanished indoors.

He approached the verandah with hesitating steps, pausing for a moment to consider a tiny cloud that drew its fleecy length over the sun's eye. His position, as he felt it, was indeed unenviable. To lose Cynthia would be an insufferable disaster. He trembled slightly as he gained the verandah, then listened for some slight sound to break the silence of the big house.

He knew that Jane Hammersly earnestly desired him to marry Cynthia. His allegiance to the memory of Eustace had prevented him urging his suit half a dozen times during the last eighteen months.

He glanced up almost fearfully at the sound of a silken skirt passing down the corridor. Cynthia had come from her room, and was now standing in the shadow of a vine-covered trellis. Her beauty and freshness had always seemed to him one of nature's miracles; she was never depressed or weary, even during the fierce tropic noons when most women exhibited signs of fatigue or ennui.

"I have just heard of Eustace's home-coming," he began, quickly. "You, too, have heard, of course?"

"Yes; one of the stockmen brought the news. It seems ages since Mr. Fitzallan disappeared."

She spoke pensively, and a thought, sharp as steel, hurt him in the passing. After these weary months, was it possible that she had lived on in the hope of Eustace's return to her!

He coughed and leaned in a careless attitude against the verandah rail. "Of course, we were surprised to hear that he had brought his wife home," he continued. "No one suspected that he would ever marry the daughter of David Bellinger."

"The girl who swore to his innocence at the murder trial?"

"Yes."

A silence followed, in which Gerard Mason had leisure to ponder his own excrescences of speech. And why had he mentioned the name of Hetty Bellinger?

Cynthia had seated herself some distance from him. To his throbbing mind she appeared farther

away than the planet Venus. He wiped his face to gain breathing space, and groaned inwardly at the task not yet begun.

She regarded him curiously, her pandanus-leaf fan swaying gently before her. "You appear troubled this morning," she said, meeting his glance. "I hope Mr. Fitzallan's return has not depressed you."

"It could hardly," he stammered. "And yet it leaves me free to speak to you, Cynthia, for since Eustace has accepted his fate I may seek mine in a clearer spirit, and without fear of any loss of friendship."

The effect of his words was palpably insignificant. Cynthia merely yawned behind the pandanus leaf.

"I hardly understand," she responded at last. "Eustace—Mr. Fitzallan, I mean—is dead as far as I am concerned. Neither am I eager for his resurrection. Does that satisfy you?"

"Cynthia!" He stepped beside her, and held her hand tenderly. "My whole life, our lives, I may say, turn upon this moment. If you refuse me, I must go from here—as Eustace went."

"What do you want?"

He could not detect whether her voice had grown soft or malicious. The booming noises in his ears seemed to come from the region of his heart.

"I want you, Cynthia, you only. Do you think I have lived through these long months without singing your name to myself every morning and night!"

"Singing it?"

"Yes, until each syllable became liquid melody to me."

"Liquid nonsense, Mr. Mason!" Jane crushed forward from the passage with strangely kindling eyes. "Ask the lady properly. Didn't I warn you against this bun and poetry talk? Kiss her, man, and be hanged to the consequences."

She turned to the blushing Cynthia, and her cap shook vehemently. "We're driving to Wahgunyah after lunch, to pass the time of day with Eustace's baby and Grandfather Moneybags. Mr. Mason is waiting your answer, my dear. Give it in the presence of a witness."

The shock of Jane's unexpected outburst left Cynthia hesitating and inclined to be angry. But, in her two years' intimacy with her quick-minded mistress, she had learned to regard her eccentricities of manner with amused concern.

"If I refuse?" she asked, with a flash of half-concealed defiance.

Jane stamped in pretended anger. "Refuse him and I'll send for another minister named McSandy, an old humpbacked greybeard with a voice like my Billy. He has corns in his boots," Jane went on maliciously, "and a cheese-cutter beard. You know who I mean, Mr. Mason."

"An estimable man," nodded the minister. "A true Christian."

Jane revolved in circles about the young pair, as though thoroughly enjoying the situation.

"McSandy has a wife, too," she continued. "I'll

not take away her character, but there's no harm in saying she's stone deaf and wears men's bluchers, as becomes the wife of a bush-parson. She'll be your friend and adviser. She shall come here to live with me, if"—the cap nodded in Mr. Mason's direction—"if you cannot make up your mind in thirty seconds."

Something in the situation lit Cynthia's eyes; it was not the light of rebellion or anger which comes to young people under threats of coercion. In the last two years Jane Hammersly had played the part of mother and sister to her, with the inevitable result that a feeling of close kinship existed between them.

"I consent to marry Gerard Mason," she answered firmly, her eyes on the ground, "if you absolve me from the Fitzallan visit. I could not bring myself to that, at least not yet," she added, wryly.

"I'll take Gerard with me!" exclaimed Jane. "We'll break the news to old Moneybags and Eustace. Now, minister"—she turned to the blushing clergyman, shaking his hand violently—"you may return thanks to Miss Cynthia while I look after Billy's lunch."

Departing, as briskly as she had appeared on the scene, Jane allowed Gerard Mason breathing-space to round off the effects of her not altogether unwelcome interruption.

Jane brightened the lunch hour with quick shafts of humour directed chiefly at the blushing minister and his silent fiancée. In the two years which had passed since Eustace's disappearance

and his final return, Cynthia had often searched her conscience to discover whether her quarrel with Simon's son had been the result of her secret affection for the hard-working, poorly paid young clergyman. She had been well aware that until Eustace married, or decided to marry some one else, Gerard Mason would never ask her to be his wife ; his unbroken friendship with Simon's son would scarcely allow him to do that.

She had lost many of her English prejudices of late, and often, in her quiet rambles through the bush, she admitted to herself that her treatment of Eustace Fitzallan savoured of injustice and girlish malice.

All that was done with now. They had gone their own ways, with results far from disastrous. Eustace was no doubt happy with the woman of his choice, the woman who had saved him from the gallows.

After lunch the phaeton was driven to the front door, where the minister and Jane stood ready to take their places. William Hammersly was glad enough of an opportunity to visit Simon and put an end to the silent feud which existed between them.

Cynthia watched them depart, waved her hand as the phaeton trundled down the pine-shadowed road leading to Wahgunyah.

Jane regarded her with brightening eyes. " She's hard to win over, the minx. By and by she'll be glad enough to take tea with young Mrs. Fitzallan, eh, minister ? "

" I hope so," was Gerard Mason's devout re-

sponse. "The aristocracy of the Maranoa will learn in time to pay a little homage to Hetty Fitzallan," he predicted, warmly.

"She can afford to neglect the squattocracy and other local gargoyles," laughed Jane, "which is more than I am able to do."

The road to Wahgunyah took them over the ranges where Simon's rich pastures stretched ever and ever towards the skyline. It was a long drive, relieved by Jane's occasional caustic reference to the people who gridironed the edge of infinity with their bullock-proof fences.

"By four o'clock the minister was able to indicate the gilt flagpole of Wahgunyah homestead showing among the stiff-crested station palms. A half-bent figure, clad in white coat and pants, appeared on the verandah, holding something in his arms.

Jane Hammersly half rose in the phaeton, unable to control her excitement. "Why . . . it's Simon nursing Het's baby!" she cried.

"He'd hardly be nursing any one else's," growled her husband. "Better control yourself, my dear," he ventured, warningly. "Some men are pretty touchy when they're holding a baby."

At the sound of the wheels in the path Simon turned suddenly on the verandah, his jaw hanging at sight of the unexpected visitors. He was about to disappear indoors with the baby, but the irrepressible Jane was not to be denied.

"You've nursed millions of acres in your time, Mr. Fitzallan," she called from the phaeton, "but

nothing ever filled your arms so well as the bairn you're holding now. May I come in ? ”

“ Ye may,” he answered, glowering at her undecidedly from the doorway, “ if your mission is peace and not scandal.”

“ See how a lion may be curbed by the touch of a little child,” Jane chuckled to her husband as she descended from the phaeton. “ It’s a generation since he spoke so civil to us.”

They noted how the last two years had bleached the old cattle king, how the sharp, strident voice had given place to a querulous treble. He greeted them hospitably enough after the white-haired little woman had waved her flag of peace with certainty and conviction.

Jane capped the occasion by demanding immediate possession of the baby. She was nursing it when Eustace and Hetty appeared from some thick shrubbery at the rear of the homestead.

Hetty had changed beyond Jane’s recollection. It was not the wild-riding slip of womanhood she had once known who came forward to accept her congratulations, and return her shafts of wit with unassailable good-humour.

Hetty had exchanged the beauty of girlhood for a certain Madonna-like charm that sat upon each movement of her well-poised body. Whatever remained of Jane’s enmity was pulped in those first moments with Eustace and his wife.

She listened after a while to the young Oxonian’s story of his flight from home, the strenuous months of labour in which he and his wife had struggled

for a bare existence on a drought-stricken station, in New South Wales, where heat and famine held the land in its merciless grip.

Simon listened, too, with a glow of real pleasure in his pale eyes. It raised his own dead youth, this story of his son's victorious fight with the elements. It rekindled the lion blood in his shaking body.

And as Eustace talked to William Hammersly and the minister, a familiar figure rode past the homestead and drew rein at a word from Simon.

"Why, it's Trooper Frank Hannan!" Jane cried. "Man alive, where's your uniform?" she asked, breathlessly.

Hannan had discarded his uniform for the dress of a stockrider the day he took service with Simon. After his recovery from the wounds inflicted by Martin Bellinger he had found his Government billet irksome and unsympathetic. Certain officials at headquarters had recommended his early retirement, and so the Queensland Police Department lost a valuable but over-scrupulous trooper, whose brain and hand had found instant employment within the health-giving boundaries of Wahgunyah.

Having exchanged greetings with Jane and her husband, he rode away blithely enough to his duties within the cattle-packed centres of the run.

Towards evening the little party adjourned indoors, laughing, chatting as though their lives had never known the fierce pangs of enmity and despair.

Night fell with tropic stealth upon Wahgunyah station. A south-east wind preened the sleeping

palms, and drew from the great depths of the outer forest sighs of immeasurable content.

David Bellinger and his son Clarry rode past the homestead gate, where the house lights flooded the lawn and hammock-lined verandah. Something of the stir and movement within the house halted David for a moment. Through the half-open doors he caught a glance of the grouped figures within.

Clarry wriggled in his saddle, and with difficulty suppressed an exclamation. "Look at the parson, dad," he whispered. "Old Jane Hammersly's ticklin' his neck with a big emu fan. . . . And, Het—isn't that her, dad, standin' behind Simon with the baby?"

"That's her," David sighed. "I reckon she don't want any advice from her father. Gettin' into good society's a gift with some girls. She seems to have suffered most, and when you come to think of it she's got the most. Anyhow, it's a grand night to be out of gaol, Clarry, my boy, so we'd better be movin' home."

They rode silently, in the direction of the cottage, under a canopy of vines and creepers where the newly kindled stars burned through the purple of the Queensland night.

THE END

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